

THE ALBATROSS LIBRARY

The Brief Hour of François Villon

by
JOHN ERSKINE



THE ALBATROSS

COPYRIGHT EDITION

NOT TO BE INTRODUCED INTO THE BRITISH EMPIRE OR THE U. S. A.

LEIPZIG · PARIS · BOLOGNA



371

The Brief Hour of François Villon by John Erskine

371

THE ALBATROSS LIBRARY
THE ALBATROSS MODERN CONTINENTAL LIBRARY

The Brief Hour
of
François Villon

by
JOHN ERSKINE



THE ALBATROSS

COPYRIGHT EDITION

NOT TO BE INTRODUCED INTO THE BRITISH EMPIRE OR THE U. S. A.

LEIPZIG · PARIS · BOLOGNA

THE BRIEF HOUR OF FRANÇOIS VILLON

The poet most paradoxical in life and verse, François Villon, moves at breakneck speed through these pages, glowing with the dramatic colours of 15th century France. Pilfering, singing, disguising, loving, one minute the hangman's rope is about his neck, the next he sups at the table of his patron, Charles, Duc d'Orléans, and only his wit can save him from fresh peril. Disillusioned and betrayed at thirty Villon looked forward to the rest of his life as to a steep decline, but he still had much to do. This is the tale of these last crowded years. Told in brilliant conversation, each chapter is preceded by a translation of one of Villon's works, thus conveying the charm and explaining the outlook of the vagabond poet.

★

Wirbelnd und widerspruchsvoll jagt François Villon, der vagabundierende Dichter, durch das unruhig gärende 15. Jahrhundert Frankreichs, gepeitscht von einem Tod und Teufel, Zeit und Institutionen verachtenden Geist — sprühend vor Übermut und Kühnheit, ein Held in Lumpen, ein häßlicher, unwiderstehlicher Liebhaber, den die Natur zum Dichten und sein Impuls zur Sünde trieb. Starrend vor Schmutz oder prunkend in Seide, bei Fürsten, Gelehrten oder den schönen Mädchen — immer lebte er sich selbst, sich und das Leben verschwendend, mit der sprenghenden Unbändigkeit seiner Natur.

★

Qu'un Américain ait pu écrire sur la vie de notre 'gentil François' peut sembler paradoxal. Pourtant, John Erskine l'a fait, et magistralement. D'ailleurs, François lui-même n'est-il pas un paradoxe? Poète, tour à tour roi de la Cour des Miracles, hôte de son royal protecteur Charles, Duc d'Orléans, déguenillé ou vêtu de soie, il est à l'aise dans chacun de ses rôles. Jamais vie ne fut plus intense. Il a mordu à tous les fruits, bons et mauvais, fut un amoureux permanent: seul l'objet de sa flamme changea. Cependant, la trahison de Catherine marqua pour lui le déclin de sa jeunesse. Mais il devait encore aller loin sur cette route qui fut la sienne.

EXPLANATION OF THE COLOUR SCHEME

Red Volumes: stories of adventure and crime †
Blue Volumes: love stories
Green Volumes: stories of travel and foreign peoples
Purple Volumes: biographies and historical novels
Yellow Volumes: psychological novels, essays, etc.
Grey Volumes: plays, poetry & collected works
Orange Volumes: tales and short stories, humorous and satirical works

ERKLÄRUNG DER FARBIGEN UMSCHLÄGE

Rote Bände: Kriminal- und Abenteuergeschichten †
Blaue Bände: Liebes- und Eheromane
Violette Bände: Biographien, historische Romane
Gelbe Bände: Psychologische Romane, Essays
Orange Bände: Novellen und humoristische Romane
Graue Bände: Dramen, Gedichte u. gesammelte Werke
Grüne Bände: Reiseerzählungen, Romane aus fremden Ländern

EXPLICATION DES COULEURS DES COUVERTURES

Série rouge: romans policiers et d'aventures †
Série bleue: romans d'amour
Série verte: récits de voyage et romans exotiques
Série violette: biographies, romans historiques
Série jaune: romans psychologiques, essais, etc.
Série grise: poésies, œuvres complètes et dramatiques
Série orange: ouvrages satiriques et humoristiques, contes et nouvelles

SPIEGAZIONE DEI COLORI DI COPERTINA

Serie rossa: romanzi polizieschi e d'avventura †
Serie azzurra: romanzi d'amore
Serie verde: racconti di viaggio e romanzi esotici
Serie violetta: biografie, romanzi storici
Serie gialla: romanzi psicologici, saggi, ecc.
Serie grigia: teatro, poesia e raccolte varie
Serie arancione: opere satiriche e umoristiche, racconti e novelle

† & The Albatross Crime Club

THIS EDITION IS COMPOSED IN
GARAMOND TYPE CUT BY THE
MONOTYPE CORPORATION. THE
PAPER IS MADE BY THE BAUTZEN
PAPERMILL. THE PRINTING AND
THE BINDING ARE THE WORK OF
OSCAR BRANDSTETTER
LEIPZIG



THE ALBATROSS
MODERN CONTINENTAL LIBRARY
VOLUME 371

★

THE BRIEF HOUR OF FRANÇOIS VILLON

Buchverleih
Maximilian Ranzow

1. Geschäft:

Berlin-Steglitz, Albrechtstraße 54
Telefon: 72 30 78

2. Geschäft:

Berlin-Schönebg., Franz-Kopp-St. 46
Telefon: 71 87 09

Lesegebühr für 7 Tage 40 Pf.

Nachgebühr für je 3 Tage..... Pf.

Gilt als Neuerscheinung, b.....

Zuschl. f. Neuerscheinung..... Pf.

8722

THE ALBATROSS
MODERN CONTINENTAL LIBRARY

includes the following works by

JOHN ERSKINE

★

Volume 80:

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF HELEN OF TROY

Volume 217:

ADAM AND EVE

Volume 302:

FORGET IF YOU CAN

Volume 319:

SOLOMON, MY SON

Volume 353:

YOUNG LOVE

Volume 371:

THE BRIEF HOUR OF FRANÇOIS VILLON

THE BRIEF HOUR OF
FRANÇOIS VILLON

BY JOHN ERSKINE

'Je ris en pleurs'

published by

THE ALBATROSS

LEIPZIG • PARIS • BOLOGNA

THE VERSES SET BEFORE THESE CHAPTERS I
HAVE FREELY TRANSLATED OR PARAPHRASED
FROM THE WORKS OF FRANÇOIS VILLON.

J. E.

THE TYPOGRAPHICAL BORDER USED ON THE TITLE PAGE HAS
BEEN COMPOSED FROM MONOTYPE MATERIAL BY COURTESY
OF THE MONOTYPE CORPORATION

*

COPYRIGHT JUNE 1938

BY THE ALBATROSS VERLAG G. M. B. H., LEIPZIG

IMPRIMÉ EN ALLEMAGNE

CONTENTS

HIS CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH	8
HE DINES OUT.	15
HE TELLS A LIE	27
HE MEETS A WOMAN	40
HE WOULD FIT HIMSELF FOR THE HOME	55
HE EXAMINES HIS HEART	70
HE THINKS HIS LUCK HAS TURNED	85
HE HAS NO LUCK AT ALL	99
HE DESIRES A QUIET LIFE	113
HE GOES WHERE HE IS WANTED	127
HE ASKS FOR KINDNESS	144
HE SEES THE LAST OF A FRIEND	159
HE GIVES A HELPING HAND	174
HE TRIES TO SLIP BETWEEN DANGERS	188
HE CALLS FOR JUSTICE	202
HE LOOKS FOR WHAT IS GONE	217
HE SPEAKS TO THE SEIGNEUR	233
HE MAKES HIS MOTHER'S ACQUAINTANCE	249
HE BRINGS UP A CHILD	264

POEMS

HE CONSIDERS FROM WHENCE HE CAME	7
BALLADE TO HIS LOVE	14
THE PROFIT OF IT	26
LANDSCAPE	39
BALLADE FOR ROBERT D'ESTOUTEVILLE	54
THE BALLADE OF SMALL MATTERS	69
LEGACY	84
BALLADE OF VAIN WISDOM	98
BEAUTY	112
BALLADE OF CONTRADICTIONS	126
THE APPEAL	143
EPITAPH	158
THE COST OF LOVE	173
IN PERIL OF DEATH, HE CONTEMPLATES THE GRAVE	187
TRIBUTE TO MEUNG.	201
BALLADE OF DEAD LADIES	216
DIALOGUE OF THE HEART AND THE BODY	232
PRAYER WRITTEN FOR HIS MOTHER	248
POSTSCRIPT	263

Was das Buch spricht!

Ich gehe als guter Freund des Menschen
von Hand zu Hand; darum behandle mich
gut, lies mich nur mit reinen Händen, blättere
nicht mit feuchten Fingern um, schone mich,
schlage mich sorgfältig ein und behalte
mich nicht länger, als du mich brauchst!

HE CONSIDERS FROM WHENCE HE CAME

*I am no angel, grant me now!
No seraph from the flying host
Spawned me, with stars around his brow;
My father's dead, God keep his ghost!
Earth keeps his body, dust in dust.
My mother, soon or late, will die—
Not of her wish, but go she must;
And when the time comes, go must I.*

*To Master Guillaume de Villon,
My more-than-father, whose broad breast
From swaddling days I pastured on
And took my refuge and my rest,
Who bailed me out of many a plight—
I offer thanks on bended knee.
He never tasted my delight.
Or am I certain? Didn't he?*

*Ah God, if I had studied then
When I was young, and kept my head,
I'd have me now, with honest men,
Dry roof, warm faggots, a soft bed.
But all my work was after class,
My teachers, rascal, drab and lout.
Remembering how I played the ass,
I marvel that my heart holds out!*

THE BRIEF HOUR OF FRANÇOIS VILLON

CHAPTER ONE

His Childhood and Youth

HE MOURNED THE BRIEFNESS OF TIME. BEAUTY FILLED his eyes, he would miss none of it, and in his haste he stumbled, which brings his story home to you and me.

He painted himself in dark colours, yet the portrait survives. More than badness went into the fabric of this immortality. If you take his word for it, he was a sad rascal, but the sadness may be doubted. To live bravely, in his fashion, is a step up towards goodness.

What a man, especially a poet, says of himself, should be measured by what he does. Some good folk, lacking sight for the stuff of daily life, and therefore uncharitable, still think of François Villon as a pickpocket and a coward, but then they must call in a miracle and say that the *Ballade of Dead Ladies* and the *Prayer Written for His Mother* were born of the mire. I prefer those who begin with the poems and count them as virtues; who read in them, that is, the passion for what is fine, the disgust with what is not—the hungers of soul as well as of body, the filial piety, the love of country, the talent for being grateful.

With these critics I like to ponder one mystery of the poems, the repeated evidence that François knew intimately some of the solid folk of his day, men and women who, we must suppose, did not habitually entertain thieves and jailbirds. By what trick, if he was only a trickster, did Villon push himself into that gallery?

I believe he was born with one foot in the great world. His godfather, the chaplain of Saint Benoît, the 'more-than-father' of the poems, the guardian of his soul, was actually, I believe, the begetter of his body. His mother said she was a widow, for social purposes, but her son knew nothing about the deceased husband, and I find it easy to explain his ignorance.

His mother was a handsome girl, who took in washing, but by instinct she knew there was more to life than that,

and young Guillaume, prosperous student of theology, proved she was right. Afterwards he put his mind on God, rose in the church, lectured on the canon law, and managed well, though at long range, the farms and vineyards which were his inheritance.

When the laundress was about to take her degree in maternity, her discreet teacher, as I understand, sent her to a suburb of Paris, near Pontoise, on the Seine. There François cried his way into this passionate life, the year Joan of Arc was burned out of it. At the end of a prudent seclusion the new mother went back to her washing, and the chaplain, more because she wished it than because he did, received the boy into the cloisters of Saint Benoît, where Édouard the cook fed him, and his father-in-God and otherwise—taught him to read and write, and dedicated him, by way of reparation, to an exclusively religious life.

If the boy had not contained, then and always, the elements of goodness, he could have laid hold on life with no sting to his conscience. No doubt the chaplain was a channel or reservoir of grace, but in my judgement the lovable part of François, the daring, the wings, the heartache, came from his mother.

He went to the university, as was then the custom, while still a child, and at the age of twenty-one or thereabouts became Master of Arts. Master Villon, he called himself, slipping easily into the chaplain's name. For what he learned, outside of books, his poems later were the diploma.

In his education women took a hand, somewhat to the bewilderment of pedestrian biographers, who know he was not an Adonis, and imagine no other kind of charm. He tells us in plain terms of Isabeau or Ysabel, of Catherine and of Margot, and between the lines we discover the mistaken kindness of Ambroise, who taught him as it were the alphabet of love, and the saving apparition of Louise, who opened to him the meaning of the text, and the barbarous lure of Marguerite, who would have made impossible any reading at all.

Ambroise de Loré was older than he, a warm-tempered

efficient creature who cast eyes on him when he was but seventeen, a gawky student, wide-eared, long-nosed, large of hand and foot. It seemed high time that someone made a man of him, and at the moment she was without occupation. He learned quickly, poor boy, but he was in dead earnest. He bestowed upon her that callow thing, his heart. Embarrassed by the one gift she hadn't asked for, Ambroise shook herself free of him and his dreams, and later took for spouse Robert d'Estouteville, who became Provost of Paris, and would have hanged Master Villon with the more pleasure because he suspected something.

To the end of his days Master Villon carried the scar, not of love, but of disillusion. Against his will and only on the surface he turned bitter. The early vision smoldered. And Ambroise, secure in her marriage, was less free of him than she had expected. He and his hurt eyes followed her. Some other woman, she told herself, would have done it if she hadn't, and she hoped she was best for him, being disinterested.

He put faith next in Ysabel. His faith, you will note, could be renewed. Ysabel made no bones of a lover or two already, but she said they didn't count, and he believed her. One fine evening, when they were seated on the kerbstone before the church of Saint Benoît, discussing this and that, another student of theology, a fellow named Philippe Sermoise, happened along. He was one of those she was sure didn't count. But he drew his knife and slashed Master Villon's lip, meaning to cut his throat, and by way of retort Master Villon struck him down with a piece of the kerb, and went to Galerne, the barber near-by, to have his wound dressed. Sermoise went home and died of the paving-stone, and there would have been a hanging if the father-godfather and Ambroise and other friends in the background hadn't got the penalty softened into temporary exile. The worst was that at first glimpse of Sermoise Ysabel had fled up the street, and Master Villon would have been glad to know the duel was not of her plotting.

When Paris let him come in again, he went back to the cloisters, to his attic room, and accepted the reproachful

silences of the chaplain and the more substantial overtures of Édouard the cook, who held that a pork-pie, baked in a slow oven, is salve for any disaster. In spite of the pies, Master Villon for a time went far astray. He tried out the strength of the vine by his window, and had no further need of the cloister key. In his dark rambles he discovered Margot, fat wife of Robin Turgis, keeper of the Pine Cone Tavern. Robin was a treasury spy, and Margot was a slut, if you wish to speak of her better qualities, and Noah Jolis, her brother, was whatever God makes in His weakest moment.

For a season Master Villon gave himself to company he despised. For revenge on the world he hoodwinked Robin, and gloated, even with Margot in his arms, over the disgust she inspired. Margot suspected a flaw in this attitude but she wasn't fastidious. To her a man was a man, what thoughts soever he might conceal. She protested only when Master Villon ran, as it were, for his life. She became dangerously sensitive when he fell in love with Catherine.

To say truth, Catherine was but a few grades above Margot, but she gave Master Villon occasion to revive dreams he had supposed dead. She seemed to him, for a while at least, a messenger from heaven, perhaps because she was thin and had large eyes and thick, black hair, and she listened to his outpourings of soul as though she not only understood but wished to hear more. She dwelt in an obscure house near the cloisters, in a second-story cabinet or closet, and she liked to have notice in advance when Master Villon planned to visit her.

Either she was indeed, as he thought, the germ or root or spring-board of his poetry-making, or his simultaneous encounters with her and with the muse must be put down to accident and irony. She let him read what he wrote, and said nothing, which was as well, since a poet in the day-break of his fertility, cackling over his first egg, has comments enough of his own.

But neither Catherine nor poetry occupied all his energies. He maintained an exchange of domestic civilities with

the chaplain and the cook, he heard lectures in abstruse subjects and remembered enough to get crowned at last by the university, and he struck up a shady partnership with Montigny, a rascal but a gentleman, and with Guy Tabarie, a rascal.

Also he secured for patron Charles, Duke of Orleans, who had fought unwisely at Agincourt and from that field had been removed to an English prison, where the middle of his life was spent writing verses, till they sent him home in the beginning of old age, to hold court at Blois, with a Paris sojourn now and then, watching the world go by, and smiling wearily at those who think the procession a happy show.

Rumour of a new poet came to the duke, and when next he journeyed north he sent for François. On different grounds the friendship was precious to both. More than once Charles of Orleans disengaged Master Villon from the gallows.

Meanwhile Catherine, the ambassador of heaven, was a drain on the purse, and Master Villon, like many before and since, grew careless from what source he satisfied the demands of love. Montigny and Guy taught him both the philosophy and the technique. First he dipped, as much as was prudent, into the chaplain's money-bags. Then he ventured abroad. Detected in a few minor pilferings, he escaped with the duke's aid, but became familiar to the provost, the husband of Ambroise. Then he joined Guy and Montigny in breaking open the strong-box of the College of Navarre.

Viewed from whatever angle, it was a tragic business. His love for Catherine was already waning, yet, reluctant to admit he had twice deceived himself, he throttled his reason and pushed on hell-ward. The strong-box yielded nothing to speak of, but sacrilege was sacrilege. No appeal to the duke this time. The church would never forgive.

When next he showed himself and his poverty to Catherine, it was in a sweat of penitence, the more acute because the provost had promised the bishop to solve the crime if it took a thousand years. Master Villon had small

hope it would take so long. When Catherine cursed him for lack of enterprise, he dropped down, put his head on her knees, and confessed what he had done. The girl slapped his face, called him a bungler, pulled the bed-clothes over her head, and bade him be off where the police could trap him without peril to the innocent bystander.

He couldn't believe she meant it. Once again he came to her door, seeking no other aid than his old faith in her. She expected him to come. Noah Jolis and a handful of assisting blackguards were waiting in the dark. Their clubs broke two ribs. Her vileness broke his heart.

There ended the youth of François Villon. He looked forward to the rest of his brief hour as to a steep decline, though he was as yet only thirty, and had far to go. But the shadow of the law was upon him, and the sad knowledge, as he thought, of all men and women. He vowed to get on without hope and without trust, to take what each day should bring, to flourish by his wits and perish with a smile. If he stayed in Paris, it was because there was food in the cloisters, and a sudden departure might give the provost an idea. Besides, he still loved Paris. But waking or asleep, he carried a knife in his belt, or hid it under the pillow. If he met Montigny and Guy, it was for hasty whispers in common defence.

They were consulting one day where the street of Saint James touches the river, when a woman walked by—something lovelier than Catherine, cream-checked, wavy-haired, richly dressed. She walked fast, but she used her eyes.

In spite of himself, Master Villon dropped his more lugubrious thoughts.

'Beneath that skirt,' said Guy, somewhat too loud, 'I clearly discern . . .'

'Bite your tongue!' said Master Villon. 'She's listening.'

'A thigh like that,' said the graceless connoisseur, 'is nothing to keep silent about, nor to be ashamed of. Two thighs, in fact. Further, I discern . . . Where are you going?'

'To make peace,' said Master Villon, striding after the woman. Could you have asked his opinion, he would have said he was leaving evil behind him.

*False beauty, costing me a pretty price,
Candid at first but slippery in the end,
Cloaked soft as love, but hard as steel or ice,
My would-be murderer, my true-seeming friend—
Your charm is poison, as I doubly know,
Slow poison—and at that, not always slow.*

*Good-bye, my dear! One word before I go—
Please, when you help the poor, don't break his neck!*

*What help I need, elsewhere I should have begged,
Better to starve than see my honour hurt!
But I, once sure of foot and nimble-legged,
Now slip on mud and fill my mouth with dirt.
Meaning to run from you, I slip and fall.
You, with your hue-and-cry, your hunting call,
Have you no pity on me? None at all?
Please, when you help the poor, don't break his neck!*

*A time will come, a yellow sapless year,
To wither up the splendour that is you,
And when the vengeance strikes, may I be here!
How I shall laugh! Ah no, not laugh—I too
Shall then be old! You faded—I a wreck!
Frail beauty, drink before the wine turns sour,
Remember with what speed passes the hour,
And when you help the poor, don't break his neck!*

*Love, prince of passion, you who rule us all,
Blessed are those on whom your blessings fall!
But note, I pray—some hearts are large, some small;
Please, when you help the poor, don't break his neck!*

He Dines Out

MASTER VILLON CARRIED HIS BEST JACKET TO THE TAILOR. That is, he walked in his shirt.

'Clean the stains off it, Michel. To-night I visit a great house.'

'Through the door, is it, this time? Don't they value their silver?'

'Merit comes to its own,' said the poet cheerfully. 'I've been asked for my beauty.'

Michel had a hand under the garment, raising it in search of an area which didn't need cleaning, but for the moment he looked across his bench at the long nose, the black eyes and the thin whimsical mouth in front of him.

'It isn't blood again, is it?'

Master François raised a devout hand. 'So help me, virtuous dirt!'

'You'll want it when?'

'The invitation was for an hour after sunset.'

Michel rubbed one of the main spots and blew off the dust. 'It's now past noon. You ask a miracle. I shall charge double.'

'My purse is yours,' said the poet with a grand gesture, making for the door.

'In advance!' called the tailor. 'I know your purse!'

Master François strolled back unoffended. 'From my dream I descend to mean matters. What shall I leave you as a pledge?'

'What have you?'

Master François considered, then drew the dagger from his belt.

Michel tried the edge. There was a jewel in the hilt.

'You would go abroad without this?'

'For once I shall! This one night!'

'In that case,' said the tailor, 'leave your cap too. A clean coat would show it up. I would even suggest your breeches, if it were practical.'

Master François walked hatless but happy down Saint

James Street to the sign of Colin Galerne, the barber. 'Give me a smooth cheek this time, for the love of God!' he commanded, carrying over a chair where he could put his long legs up on the window-sill.

'It's fine weather for autumn,' observed Colin, brushing the suds into the poet's mouth, so he couldn't talk back. 'Some expect a cold spell. What's your opinion?'

Master François grunted from under the soap.

'The town has been quiet for a week. No murders. That is, none reported. No robberies. No violent arguments.'

The razor collided with a scar on Master Villon's upper lip, and the barber applied more lather. 'That cut is all but well now, isn't it! Lucky you ran in here at once!'

Master François Villon was glad there were no other customers.

'Let's see,' persisted Colin, 'that little fight came off no more than thirty paces from my door. If you hadn't found me in the shop, by mere accident, at that late hour . . .'

He stopped talking, to draw the skin tight around the chin.

'There you are, smooth as a girl!'

The thin youth stood up and pretended to search for coins in his trouser-pocket. 'Now, what do you think of that!'

'I've thought of it before,' said the barber, with a sudden dash of spirits. 'Not a sou, I suppose!'

'Plenty, plenty, but my purse is in my jacket!'

'And who, may I ask, has the jacket?'

'Michel. I'm to stop for it on the way—I'll be passing again in a minute or two, unless the villain has found it!'

With that he left the shop before the barber could get hand on him, and an hour after sunset, if you please, he was parading down to the river, over the bridge to the island named for Saint Louis, in a clean jacket, a clean face and a clean hat, with the breeches coming along under the fresh splendour, not looking so out-of-place as you'd think.

He stopped at a large house close to the edge—you'd say it was built in the water. More than a house, a castle. A

fortress, rather. On the street side there were no windows, only a dark door under an arch, with iron hinges riveted into the oak. Ordinarily he would have knocked with the handle of his dagger. Now he used his foot.

The person who unfastened lock and bolt from within and swung back the heavy barrier, was a poor promise of hospitality. He stood in the shadow, alert and suspicious, six feet tall or somewhat beyond, with thick shoulders and a small head, more jaw than brow, and a wicked knife at his belt.

'What's your errand here?' said he, as a wolf might ask you in a starving frost.

'I'm dining with the lady of the house,' the poet explained, not altogether comfortable.

'Was this the night?' growled the giant. 'Not that it makes much difference!' With that he fastened the bolts again and put the key on a nail, out of easy reach.

Master Villon lifted a meditative hand to his smooth chin. 'Have I come to the wrong house?'

'She lives here,' said the unpleasant porter.

'As yet,' said the nervous poet, 'I don't know her name, but her hair curls, and it's black, and her cheeks are cream and rose, and in a chance meeting you'd say she was affable. Here I recognize nothing of her essential character.'

'You should have thought of that before you knocked,' said the fellow. 'Follow me along this corridor. We'll need no light if you take care at the corner. The wrong door leads down to the river.'

'Very convenient,' said the poet, making the best of it. 'If you care for boat-rides, there's nothing like a private dock.'

The giant got him safely around the corner, to the right door, and a blaze of cheer burst on him from candle-lighted walls. To Master Villon's surprise the lout gave a push, to shove him in, and with no other announcement of the guest, shut the door again and disappeared.

There she was, across the room, waiting for him.

Better-looking than when she had spoken to him on the street. Or was it he who had spoken to her?

The face and the hair as he had remembered, with the same strange mischief in the eyes. And her body beneath the evening gown, not too much beneath it—well, he could see the street-cloak had cheated him.

‘At your service, my lady!’ He swung his cap in a grand bow.

‘I doubt it,’ said she pleasantly. ‘So far I’ve had from you only an insult.’

‘Never!’ he cried. ‘It was an uncontrollable outpouring of my adoration.’

She laughed, standing by the great hearth, and he dropped his clean hat on a chair and moved over towards the flame.

‘Confess,’ she challenged, ‘when you made that proposal to me, you didn’t know who I was!’

‘I don’t now, nor do I care!’

‘Ah, but now you have seen my home. Then you took me for a street-girl!’

‘You walked alone,’ said he, misguided by an instinct for logic.

‘I sometimes do!’

‘In any case,’ said he, recovering himself, ‘it was love!’

‘It was an insult!’

‘One, however, which you can forgive.’

‘Never!’

He lifted her hand to his lips, and then held on to it.

‘Do some confessing yourself! Confess that my proposal which insulted the lady, appealed to the woman!’

She smiled, and she did not withdraw her hand.

‘We understand each other,’ said he.

At that, she reached for the bell-cord by the chimney. ‘In time we shall, no doubt. Meanwhile, let us dine.’

The fellow who brought in the food was no handsomer than the terrifying porter, but at least he was not so tall. A powerful dwarf, cross-eyed. He came in through a narrow door which Master Villon had not observed, over in the shadow of the room, and he must have been waiting outside, to answer the bell so quickly.

‘A table before the hearth,’ commanded the lady, ‘and fresh candles!’

So in a moment, there they were sitting, with a roasted fowl and a flagon of wine.

‘My divine hostess,’ exclaimed the poet, suddenly truthful, ‘such fare is for me either a memory or an ideal!’

‘Can you carve?’ said she.

The knife on the platter was a dull thing, and by instinct he reached for his dagger, she watching closely, and, he thought, smiling at his embarrassment.

‘Just pull the bird apart,’ she urged, ‘with your fingers, if that’s more convenient.’

While he worked away, she filled his glass. As soon as the meat was on the plate, he filled hers. ‘To happiness and love!’

They lifted to the toast together, hand matching hand, his eyes meeting her smile, but when she only pretended to taste, he copied the gesture and set the wine down.

‘You don’t drink!’

‘Nor you!’

‘There’s no poison in it,’ she laughed. ‘I was considering your wise distinction, happiness *and* love.’

‘To *our* love!’ said he and drained the glass.

‘Did you enter this house for love?’

‘For what else?’

‘Since you spoke to me, I have learned who you are.’

‘In my lesser condition, Adorable, I am a poet.’

‘A thief, I believe.’

‘If I could steal your heart!’

Her fingers played with the stem of her glass. ‘Should you meet a sudden end, the city fathers would draw a long, grateful breath.’

‘You have talked with my critics!’

‘As a matter of fact, with the city fathers.’

His gaze was as steady as hers. ‘This is an envious world, my lady, and rightly so. Fortune is not equal. At this moment I, most unworthy I, have you!’

‘Ah, so confident?’ Her eyes glittered for a second, yet he thought her not displeased.

‘Will you drink to our love?’

She hesitated, then with a firm motion raised the glass. ‘So be it!’

He rose to claim a kiss, but she waved him back to his place. 'I learned more about you. You are a merciless woman-hunter. Your admiration is bestowed wholesale. I am almost the last one in the city. I am not flattered!'

'They lie!'

'Then I am sorry. Though it wasn't flattering, it made me willing to look at you.'

When he fumbled for an answer, she laughed, pushed away from the table, and held out her hand. 'Come!'

He had his kiss then, but she drew him towards a curtain, with a door behind it, and soft lights prepared for them within.

When they stood again before the great hearth, where they had dined, the fire was low, and the night air came in through the large window, opened perhaps by the dwarf when he took away the table.

'My dear, my dear!' she whispered, reaching up for his lips.

'Paradise!' he whispered back.

'See,' she cried softly, 'they left us the wine and a fresh glass!'

'Only one?'

'We shall both drink from it! Against the cold!'

It crossed his mind that the evening was balmy.

'I can't bear to have you leave me,' she sighed.

'Do you imagine I shan't come again?'

She stood off from him, and that glitter returned. 'When?'

'To-morrow, perhaps?'

For a second she rested her head on his breast, laughing as he thought, hysterically, then stepped back a pace or two. 'Remember, it was an insult!'

Her hand went to the bell-cord. 'I played fair, but I don't forgive!'

With that the giant porter and the husky dwarf were standing beside him, and before he had his wits there was a sack over his head—and he without his dagger! When they tripped him up he could do nothing but kick, tearing at the cloth with his fingers.

'Tie it firmly,' was the last he heard her say.

But as they lifted him through the window his right hand found a little hole in the sack. He hit the water before he could give a strong pull at it.

Twelve hours later, in mid-afternoon, Master Villon carried his best jacket to the tailor. Also his breeches. His temporary covering was several sizes too large.

'Clean the stains off my clothes, Michel. I'll need them at the usual time, around sunset!'

'God!' exclaimed the tailor. 'They're soaking wet!'

'Also, I need a new cap, and I'll take back my dagger.'

'Oh, you will?'

Master Villon laid down a large gold piece.

'Stolen?' asked the tailor, biting it.

'Borrowed. It's twice your fee. Give me back enough for two shaves, and keep the rest.'

With the dagger safe in his belt again, he walked down the street of Saint James.

'You'll pay me now!' cried the barber, running out at him.

'Gently, gently,' said the poet, fetching a handful of sous from the depths of the ballooning breeches. 'Here's for yesterday and to-day. Give me that smooth cheek again. It worked wonders!'

In the early dusk, if you please, he was crossing the bridge to the Saint's island, and knocking at the dark door under the arch, with the handle of his knife.

And there was the giant on the inside, making a noise with the lock and the bolts.

'What's your errand here?'

When Master Villon stepped softly in, without a word, the fellow, seeing who it was, collapsed against the wall, every tooth in his head chattering.

It wasn't hard to find the way along the corridor, around the bad turn, and the poet knew how to put his feet down so they wouldn't sound. That way he had the door open and was moving towards the hearth before she saw him. She was eating at the little table, alone.

Just the faintest scream from her. He swung his cap in a grand bow, and drew up his chair opposite. She was quite pale.

There was meat on her plate, and wine in her glass. He pointed to the empty cloth in front of him. Cautiously, as though fearing he might stop her, she backed towards the bell-cord and rang it. The dwarf stuck his head in.

'A plate and a glass for monsieur!'

She remained standing by the signal-rope till the dwarf returned, her eyes never off her visitor, and he just as steady, without blinking a lid. A silent age.

But when the dwarf set the plate before him, Master Villon gave the clown a sudden stare, right under his nose, and the teeth-chattering was worse than at the door. In less than no time the poet and the lady had the room to themselves. He motioned her to sit down again, and she obeyed, now a shade less pale.

Since the only meat was on her plate, he leaned over and divided it equally with his dagger. She noticed the dagger. Also she watched him put the food in his mouth. Then her colour came back, and she smiled.

'Ghosts do not eat!'

He kept the mask of his face, and for reply lifted his glass. It was empty, of course, and she would have filled it, but he pushed away the hand. Her glass was full. He threw the wine into the fire, and offered again the silent pledge in nothing. It frightened her.

'I ask no forgiveness,' she exclaimed, trying to be bold. 'You earned death!'

He went on with the food, keeping his gaze level with hers, and the dagger always in his hand. She had no appetite, and he enjoyed the fading of colour from her lovely cheeks.

'You were a fool to come back!'

He took his time, cleaned up the plate with a piece of bread, and wiped his lips.

'That's as it may be,' he said. 'I will now expound to you my reasons. When I climbed from the river this morning, I went to my simple lodgings and got into bed, having

no dry clothes. In that ignominious state I was visited by two friends. You remember them, perhaps?'

She did not answer.

'The two who were with me when I first had the pleasure of addressing you, on the street.'

'I noticed you were in bad company!'

'Those are the ones I refer to,' he continued. 'They stopped in to see if I were still alive.'

She leaned forward. 'Did you dare tell them what happened?'

'Madam, our love is sacred!'

'Our love!' she echoed.

'But I mentioned the fact that you threw me into the river. They advised me to leave the city. People of your station are thorough in their revenge; if I were recognized by you or your servants, you would finish what, with so much enthusiasm, you began.'

'Well?'

'Madam, I had three reasons for not following their excellent counsel. In the first place, I refuse to be compelled by fear. I owe it to myself, and perhaps to you, to demonstrate that your methods of drowning your guests are inefficient.' He lifted the empty glass, in a mock toast. She reddened slightly.

'The second reason?' she asked.

'As you suggested last night, I may come to a violent end. I can think of no hands at which I should more willingly die. In fact, I love you.'

The last colour went from her cheeks. 'If you hadn't insulted me when we first met!'

He nodded. 'I too regret that beginning. The sentiment I now entertain for you makes my first proposal seem altogether shameful. Your treatment of me, in the circumstances, was really too generous, too gentle. When I consider what I deserved...'

She leaned across the table. 'I never before encountered a man with an honest mind! I admire your confession! Was that your third reason for coming?'

'Madam, what I've just said is spontaneous, wrung from

me by the sight of you, at this moment. Your present beauty teaches me more wisdom than in absence I could ever think up.'

She rose from where she sat, and came to the side of his chair.

'Would you think less of me if I forgave?'

'I dare not hope for grace,' said he. 'Your contempt is too good for me.'

'But there is no contempt! Would I have let you come at all, the first time, had I not cared? Don't you see?'

'I don't,' said he modestly. 'To what do you refer?'

She held out both her hands and would have drawn him to his feet, but he froze to the chair.

'Come,' said she, with her heart in her voice.

He put on a look of pathetic bewilderment.

'It's my way of asking forgiveness,' she urged. 'Come!'

'Can it be,' said he, with the simplicity of a child, 'that after all my rudeness you are inviting me a second time to that delicious chamber in which I found paradise?'

For reply she buried her blushes on his shoulder.

'In that case,' said he, 'I must respectfully decline!'

She straightened up like a steel blade.

'Madam, my third reason for returning to this dangerous neighbourhood was that I hoped to God I could make you ask for my love, so I could say no!'

She stepped back towards the chimney, where the bell-cord hung. 'This time you are unforgivable!'

With that she gave the cord a sharp pull.

He knew which one he'd strike down first, when they came in with the sack. He would hide the knife under his arm, and just as they lifted the bag...

'My household are laggards this evening,' said she, mortified. 'I never have to ring twice.'

'They may have stepped out for a moment,' said Master Villon, much relieved. 'When I looked at them, I thought I saw something in their faces...'

Startled she rang again, and they waited.

'We have the house to ourselves, Beautiful! You are in my power.'

Only a lady born could have carried it off so well. 'In your power, my dearest, here or elsewhere, for ever!'

'When I returned this evening,' said he, ignoring the compliment, 'I had a further hope—of pushing you through that window in another sack.'

'There *is* another sack,' said she sweetly. 'I'll show you where we keep them.'

'For the moment,' said he, 'I shall be content if you will kindly unbar your front-door.'

While she struggled with the lock and the heavy bolts, he made no offer to assist. She was breathless before the barrier swung slowly inward. He kissed her hand, and stepped out free under the bright heavens.

'Will you remember,' she asked, 'among all the girls...'

'I have loved but once,' he swore, sweeping her a grand bow. 'Good night, Beautiful!'

She laughed. 'As though this were the end!'

*One reward is sure to come,
 Let me warn you now, young lover—
 Serving love, you'll reap therefrom
 Sorrow pressed and running over.*

*Put no trust in wit! I'll warrant,
 Though you're crafty, or you aren't,
 One reward is sure to come.*

*Better to be blind and dumb
 Than look, and tell her what you see!
 When you're tempted, learn from me,
 Who saw too much and spoke too free,
 One reward is sure to come.*

He Tells a Lie

WHEN MASTER VILLON, POET EXTRAORDINARY, HAD climbed the cloister wall by the help of the old vine, to his attic room, he shed his clothes and went to bed. Two nights to make up, and his nerves stretched to breaking!

He hadn't slept so soundly since boyhood. Neither his godfather nor Edouard the cook knew of his presence in the house. It was ten o'clock of a sunny morning before he came to, and he wouldn't have waked then if a heavy hand hadn't slapped his shoulder. Long habit aiding him, he seized the knife from under his pillow, slipped out the farther side of the mattress, and faced the intruder.

'Courage!' said a well-bred voice. 'It isn't so bad as you think. It's me.'

'For God's sake, Montigny, you gave me a start!'

Whereupon the poet restored the knife to the pillow, poked that article of furniture to soften the straw, and got into bed again.

'I don't think much of your vine staircase,' said Montigny. 'Pull on your breeches. You and I are travelling south within the hour.'

'Not I,' said Master Villon, stretching his toes farther down under the blankets. 'I devote this day to quiet. I need solitude and rest.'

The visitor stood beside the bed, one hand twisting a smart moustache—a slender hand, a moustache pointing the corners of a thin mouth. Master Villon looked up, the visitor looked down, both pair of eyes unblinking, like two dogs in the street ready to lock jaws.

'Did the tailor clean your suit?' asked Montigny.

'Thanks to your gold piece.'

'Did you dine with her again, as you threatened?'

'Threatened? As I promised!'

'And you repeated your conquest?'

'When she dropped in my arms, I said, "Thank you, no!"'

'Truth?'

'So help me!'

'Well,' said Montigny, 'that's too cruel. She'll kill you for that!'

'If I understood her parting words,' said Master Villon, 'she does hope for revenge, but I shan't run away. She is resourceful as well as charming. I shall be at hand when she's ready.'

'You aren't maudlin about her, are you?'

'Sleepy, rather. Were you about to take your leave?'

Montigny leaned over the bed. 'That gold piece—I forgot to tell you it was false!'

'So?' Master Villon for a moment raised his head from the pillow, then sank back and yawned. 'The tailor can worry!'

'The tailor, among others,' said Montigny. 'He tried to spend it yesterday evening, and this morning when they pressed his thumbs he told where he got it.'

Master Villon was out of bed, dressing rapidly.

'Counterfeiters boil in oil,' said Montigny, stating a principle of nature. 'The tailor boils at four o'clock this afternoon. If they can find you, to deliver the invitation, you will join him in the cauldron. But it occurred to me that a journey south, on a fast horse...'

'You have no horse.'

'But I know where to find one!'

Master Villon drew his belt tight, and stuck his knife in it. 'Did you know that piece was false?'

Montigny's thin mouth smiled uncomfortably. 'Three pieces were in my purse, and I suspected one of them, and by accident...'

'By accident you've been found out,' said Villon. 'There'll be room for three in that soup-pot!'

'I provide for your escape,' said Montigny.

'You wish to remove the evidence,' said Villon.

Each had his dagger-hand on his belt.

'If you name me,' began Montigny, at the lower end of what was to be a grand threat.

Master Villon turned conciliatory. 'If you would carry a prompt message to Duke Charles...'

'I prefer not to meet him!'

'Well, keep out of sight, but take the message! Tell him I'm in danger of being hanged this afternoon...'

'Boiled, if you stay here!'

'I shall stay, and I've decided to be hanged, unless he hears of it in time. Just before they pull the ladder away, if the duke permits them to go so far, I'll shout out the name of the friend who made the coin.'

Montigny drew his knife at the last words, but quickly put it back again.

'Quite right,' said Master Villon. 'They wouldn't lend a horse if you had blood on you.'

When he knocked at the prison, twenty minutes later, Robert d'Estouteville, the provost himself, unbarred the door, and did not trouble to conceal his amazement.

'You of all people, to come where you're wanted!'

Master Villon sauntered into the grim corridor, as though glad to be for a moment among friends.

'A neighbour of mine is in difficulties, I hear, a simple fellow, a tailor.'

The provost, having replaced the bolts, took occasion to confiscate the dagger protruding from the belt. Master Villon seemed not to notice.

'The man is innocent,' he continued. 'I know you'll be glad to hear it.'

'For two years or more,' said the provost, 'I've been praying for this hour! The stairs to the right, if you please! Don't stumble.'

At the bottom of the winding stones Master Villon might have been shocked, had that been his first glimpse of a torture-chamber. A pine-knot, smoking from the wall, gave just enough light for the keepers to work by. No prisoner had time to complain of the smoke in his eye. A machine like a table filled the middle of the floor. Three dark figures were watching a white carcass hanging clear of the ground, the carcass being Michel the tailor. Master Villon understood the routine. Michel's hands were tied behind his back and he was hanging by his wrists, a pain-

ful posture if the bones held, and worse if they didn't.

'He's fresh from the rack,' said the provost, 'and we're letting him rest.'

'For the love of God!' groaned the tailor.

'While we ask *you* a few questions,' continued the provost, and with that the three helpers had Master Villon on the table and tore the garments off so they could see how much strain to apply.

'Is this necessary?' inquired the prostrate poet. 'I gave Michel the gold piece for cleaning the suit you handle so roughly. He bit the money to be sure. If counterfeit ever touched that man's fingers, it was against his will, and without his knowledge.'

'Since you confess your guilt,' said the provost, 'the tailor may stand on his feet and ease his elbows while we learn from you where you make these coins and who assists you. A full turn of the windlass, there!'

The shade of a second before Master Villon's joints came apart, the rope around his right ankle broke, and they had to loosen the machine and start over again. Master Villon got his breath and resumed conversation in a reasonable tone.

'The gold piece was a gift from the Duke Charles, some time ago, and I spent it now only because I was going into the sort of society the duke adorns, and I'd hate to appear unworthy of my distinguished protector.'

'The windlass again!' ordered the provost, rendered more determined by mention of the duke.

'As I left my room to bring aid to Michel,' continued Master Villon quickly, 'I sent word to him that you would perhaps overstep your authority. He is on his way now. I believe he hopes to find me in good health!'

The provost stared a moment, and the poet thought his plea had taken effect. He was sure of it when he heard the next words out of the grim mouth. 'Let him up, men! Put his clothes back on! We know what we need.'

Master Villon found it difficult to stand. 'I shan't be myself again for months!' he complained. 'The duke shall hear of this!'

'It will go in the final report,' said the provost. 'We'll tell him that you said he gave you a gold piece, which is one lie, and that you invited him to visit this jail, which is another.'

'So help me!' said Master Villon, raising his right hand, as the keepers were getting his shirt down over him.

'The duke,' said the provost, 'is here in Paris.'

'As I happen to know,' said Master Villon.

'But you may not know,' continued the provost triumphantly, 'that he wished to be present in person to see your accomplice boil. A previous engagement will keep him away—he's entertaining some friends this afternoon, and he doubts if the ladies would enjoy it.'

It was Master Villon's turn to stare, but the provost was disposed to waste no more thought on him.

'Put them in separate cells. They won't need any lunch. Start the fire under the cauldron at one o'clock, or thereabouts. We'll bring the ladder and the rope at two.'

'You speak in enigmatic terms,' said Master Villon, rubbing an aching shoulder. 'A rope, did you say?'

The provost chuckled. 'Your tailor man ought to have been more careful where he spent that coin. He gave it to the duke's steward for rent, and the duke, not recognizing his own gift, demands the full rigour of the law.'

'But Michel isn't to blame!'

'In a sense I believe you,' agreed the provost, urging him off to his cell. 'It will be on your conscience, when he squirms in the oil, but we'll place the cauldron so he'll have his revenge. He can watch you twisting in the halter.'

That afternoon Master Villon and Michel occupied a plank across a cart, and the cart made its way slowly through the crowds around the gallows at Montfaucon. The stout tailor, with his arms still tied behind him but with a black robe drawn hastily over his skin, leaned forward in a state of collapse, what with pain and what with fear. Master Villon, suffering a separate but minor set of aches, exercised his habitual grace of spirit. If Montigny had got the news to the duke, the duke would come, and if he arrived in time, Master Villon counted on the great man's tenderness

for poets, even when they were disreputable. Duke Charles made verses himself. Master Villon was almost sure he would arrive in time.

By way of bravado, since his confidence was not perfect, he rallied Michel. 'That gown does you no credit! For the sake of your art you should have insisted on breeches of your own make, with braid down the velvet!'

Michel was too far gone to care. Master Villon tried to rouse him with a few extra terrors.

'The last time I saw it done the poor devil kept drawing up his toes as they lowered him into the oil. He went in backside first, which was of course ridiculous. Remember not to pull up your toes!'

Michel must have heard, for he raised a bitter eye.

'We always have something to be thankful for,' Master Villon pressed on. 'You wouldn't think of it, not having studied philosophy, but it's a comfort to a scholar like me. That other forger I referred to was dipped in his birthday skin, all but a handkerchief in the centre because there were ladies present. Now you, though grotesque in that night-gown, are at least covered, and they'll probably tie the lower hem under your feet. That way they'll be able to lift all of you out at once afterwards. You've boiled a chicken in your time, I suppose? The fatter the bird, the sooner the flesh parts from the bones.'

'God!' shrieked Michel. 'I can stand no more! Hell is too good for you!'

'Our besetting weakness,' commented Master Villon, 'comes to the top at the last hour. You never had a sense of humour.'

The cart had reached the gallows on the hill, where the cauldron, by the provost's orders, had reached already a vicious temperature. Rumour of the execution had brought out the citizens—men, women, and children, especially women—and the constables had their hands full, keeping back the mob. A bench of clean wood had been set up in the front-row, as it were, for the gentry if any should attend. Master Villon took what courage he could from this furniture, but as he climbed up the ladder, rung by rung,

with the hangman, his heart did sink a little. He turned to view the landscape.

'Wait till you reach the top!' said his attendant. 'I'll give you a moment, if you want to pick out your friends.'

'They are all my friends!' sighed Master Villon, moving up as slowly as he could. 'I was just fixing the town in my memory. I've enjoyed the place, on the whole.'

At the top of the ladder, as soon as the rope was fitted, the hangman kept his word and allowed a short grace. Master Villon turned cautiously, for fear of slipping, and surveyed the roofs and streets where he had tasted so rich a portion of wretchedness and pleasure. Catherine was there—and Ambroise, wife of the provost, of the man who was supervising this ceremony—and the College of Navarre—and his godfather, if that title was accurate—and his mother, who had prayed daily for him. On one count or another he had at various times expected to be hanged, but never for a crime he hadn't committed. He wished he could squeeze more comfort from his innocence.

He looked down on the other actor and on the entirely cheerful and impatient audience. They were swinging poor Michel over the pot. Two executioners were working a heavy bellows to blow the fumes off the oil, so he wouldn't suffocate. The hangman was looking up at him, ready to pull away the ladder.

And there, on the bench in the front-row, just arrived, sat Duke Charles with his party of great folks! The ladies had decided not to be squeamish. The elderly duke—world-weary and amused, astonished at nothing. Beside him sat a lovely creature with curly hair, and skin of a delicious cream. As Master Villon fixed his eye on her, she looked up at him.

The one who had tried to drown him! The one whose love, the next night, he had spurned! If anything on earth could please that woman, it would be the sight of him hanged! After he had tried to play the fine gentleman!

'Pull away the ladder!' he called down. 'I have seen enough!'

But just at that moment the dark lady with the white

skin grasped the arm of Duke Charles. 'The devil knows his own!' she exclaimed.

'It's a habit of the devil!' said the duke. 'Were you thinking of yourself or of me?'

She pointed. 'The biggest liar in the world!'

The duke looked once and jumped to his feet. 'My best poet!' he cried. 'Here, wait a moment!'

'Shall we go on with the tailor?' said the provost, trying to save something from defeat.

'D'Estouteville, didn't I tell you never to hang François Villon without giving me a chance at him?'

'He's a liar, my lord,' said the provost.

'He is indeed!' said the lady.

'Fetch him down,' said the duke, 'and let the tailor wait!'

While they were unharnessing the poet, Duke Charles gave him a character.

'The man has charms,' he explained, 'and there's a wealth of bitter music in him which takes the place of the ordinary virtues. The last thing to do with him is trust him—or hang him!'

'My lord,' said the provost, 'he says he gave the gold piece to the tailor...'

'No doubt.'

'But he says he had the gold piece from you.'

'If that were so,' said the duke, 'and if that were all he had from me, I'd be better off. Here we are!' he cried cheerfully, as the prisoner was led up. 'Did I give you that gold piece?'

'You did not,' said Master Villon, conscious of the hostile audience whose entertainment had been interrupted.

'Why did you lie?'

'To save a friend, my lord. He lent me the piece in good faith, I believe, having received it I don't know from whom, but your provost is so free with the law he can't distinguish between an unknown criminal and an habitual victim like myself.'

The duke laughed. Master Villon noticed the lady didn't smile. 'So,' continued the duke, 'you were dying to save a friend?'

'Frankly, no, my lord! My friend left town some hours ago on the fastest horse he could borrow—at least, I hope he borrowed it. I'm merely sticking to Michel here, who has done no wrong.'

The duke stroked his chin.

'D'Estouteville, the tailor goes back to his cell till to-morrow. You might ask the surgeon to look him over. Master Villon is dining with me.'

'Dining, my lord? How shall I state that fact in the record?'

The duke was helping the dark lady to her feet, and his men were bringing up the horses for the ride home.

'Are you asking whether I take my guests from the jail? Why not? Haven't I myself occupied a cell, in England? Master Villon's trial is not yet concluded. In fact, it has but begun. Perhaps you will be hanging him to-morrow, with my consent.'

'And the tailor, my lord...'

'They'll go together, either way.'

So Master Villon found himself sitting in the castle at the duke's left hand, with the lady across the table from him, at the duke's right, and the other gentry around the board, curious for the end of the adventure. The lady had said not a word, and only when she thought Master Villon was not looking at her did she look at him. His head was a bit light for lack of sleep and because of the tumult of the day, and his swollen joints throbbed from that pull of the windlass. He was sorry to be facing her with his faculties at less than their keenest.

'Now, François,' said the duke, when the meal was midway between soup and fish, 'you've put a great embarrassment on me! I can't for ever condone crime in the interest of art—not unless the art is greater than the crime, and I'm not sure even your art can claim another mercy. Lady Marguerite here, with the penetration which belongs to her character, observed as you stood on that ladder that you're the greatest liar in the world. I informed her that you are a poet, which is perhaps the pleasanter way to put it. We'd be glad to have our judgement confirmed, and I

as your protector should have an easier conscience if you'd kindly demonstrate forthwith that your skill as an artist is still a step or two ahead of your energy as a rascal.

'I therefore propose,' continued the duke, as serious as a judge, 'that you fabricate on the spot a handsome falsehood. If my guests agree that it's the greatest lie they ever heard, you have your liberty. If anyone here can tell a better one, you hang.'

The steward came to the head of the table and tried to say something, but since it was about household business, the duke waved him off.

Master Villon rubbed his forehead with a hand which tried not to shake, his eyes lifted to the white brow across the table, the lips he had kissed, the soft cheeks . . .

'Very well, my lord!' he exclaimed briskly. 'The least credible stories, as you know, are the true ones. I offer you a page from my humble life.'

'The day before yesterday I met on a street-corner that charming person at your right hand. Her name, if I heard you correctly, is Lady Marguerite.'

The great folks around the table laughed at the bold overture.

'Always susceptible to beauty, and particularly ardent at that moment, I lifted my cap, bowed in my best manner, and inquired whether Lady Marguerite had any engagements for that evening, or whether she shared my disposition to spend the night—wherever she preferred. With flattering enthusiasm, the grace of which I shall always recall, she named her own address on the river-bank at the end of the venerable island.'

The great folks gasped at the development of this fantasy, and even Duke Charles scowled. The lady herself had turned to marble.

'When I reached her well-appointed residence,' continued Master Villon, with his eyes on the table mostly, but glancing up now and then to see how she was taking it, 'and when I had satisfied the porter at the door that I was the guest of the evening, Lady Marguerite set before me a dinner which I enjoyed even more than yours, my

lord—exceptional food, unbelievable wine. We talked of this and that, kindling to each other's soul as lovers will, until she conducted me to her boudoir. Of what there occurred I will say nothing—delicacy forbids and words are weak, but to beauty I owe at least this tribute, that no gentleman here has imagination fleet enough to catch up with the facts.'

'François,' interrupted the duke, 'I excuse you from hanging, I pronounce you Liar-in-Chief, but stop before I come to the defence of my guest and slit your throat!'

'My lord,' said Master Villon stubbornly, 'this contest was not of my seeking, but having launched me on the creative tide, not even you can stop me! My story has but begun. When at last we returned from that delicious room, with Lady Marguerite clinging to my arm, I should have said that no rift could ever imperil our harmonious bliss, but she, regretting perhaps her generosity and fearing lest I, through over-pride, might mention it, rang for her servants, who stuffed me into a sack and tossed me through the window to drown!'

Duke Charles smiled, thinking himself well past an awkward moment.

'And the conclusion of the tale, I suppose, is that your body is now washing towards the sea?'

'No, my lord, my body is here. I got out of the sack and swam ashore. Michel had a sorry task cleaning my clothes. I gave him the gold piece for it.'

He paused and glanced across the table. Everyone, in fact, looked at Lady Marguerite. She was still marble.

'The story seems to be complete,' said the duke, 'and the vote will now be taken. All those who think this the greatest lie they ever heard, please raise their hands!'

One hand went up from each guest except Lady Marguerite.

'You're not voting?' asked the duke. 'Did you ever hear a better one?'

She answered distinctly. 'It's no lie, my lord—it's the truth.'

Just a second of astonishment, then they all laughed heartily.

'I am sorry, François,' said the duke, 'but you hang! That shoots beyond your mark!'

Lady Marguerite looked across the table at the poet and smiled.

'There's more to the story,' insisted Master Villon, with a flavour of wrath in his voice, as well as of fear. 'The next night—that's *last* night—I returned to her door, and the porter, thinking me safely drowned, had a fit at sight of my ghost, so I got to her room, and she too thought I was a dead man walking, but when she saw her mistake she asked forgiveness for the murder, which of course I granted, and then she asked me to repair to the boudoir again, and I had the great pleasure of refusing, though she begged, you might say, on her knees, with such a yearning of the eyes, such a hungry tone in the voice, such a grip in the fingers . . .'

'God! That's a lie!' exclaimed Lady Marguerite, starting to her feet.

Duke Charles gazed thoughtfully at the handsome angry woman and at the thin alert poet.

'The court is adjourned,' he said, with unusual softness. 'This time we shan't need a vote.'

Lady Marguerite dropped back into her chair, cheeks flushed, eyes cast down.

The steward, sticking his head in at the door, still had something on his mind. Duke Charles beckoned him in.

'See that Master Villon reaches the city gates—and turn him loose.'

Master Villon rose, bowed personally to Lady Marguerite, and went off under escort.

The steward came again to the duke's chair.

'I didn't summon you,' said the duke.

'But the tailor,' said the steward.

'Ah, yes! Let him go.'

The steward lingered.

'What else?' asked the duke.

'My lord, that fast horse of yours, the new one, was stolen this afternoon.'

LANDSCAPE

*Coming through the woods, I heard
The pleasant tune of many a bird,
Nightingales with golden notes,
Larks with morning in their throats.
Near the spring a shepherdess
Braided wild flowers for her dress,
By the slender waterfall.
Her song was loveliest of all.*

*Minding her, I took my way
Through the trees again to-day,
And found among the oaken shades
Not one but three kind shepherd maids.
The first one kissed me on the brow,
The second set my lips aglow,
The third one, when I asked, said 'No!'
She was the loveliest of all.*

FRANÇOIS VILLON, POET IN FLIGHT, TURNED ON HIS SIDE, woke in a state of panic, and tried to recall where he was.

The light was grey, an hour before dawn.

The stamp of a horse! Had they found him? He sat up on the hay-mow.

No, it was the farmer below, working at the cow. He could hear the swish of milk in the pail. Master Villon collapsed upon his stolen bed.

God, but he was hungry! Just listen to that milk! And in the farm-kitchen, for honest care-free men, there would be eggs and bread, perhaps a slice of pig or chicken.

His thoughts went back to the wrongs he had suffered. Old stories, all of them. Except Marguerite, of course. Before Marguerite—Catherine. If ever he got his hands on Catherine again, he'd cut her throat. Or break her neck. Or strangle her slowly, till her beautiful eyes popped out. There's womankind for you—take your love while the pocket is full, leave you in your bad hour.

And Noah Jolis, who to please Catherine had beaten him—and Margot, his fat sister—and Robin Turgis, of the Pine Cone Tavern, who had Margot for wife and deserved no better!

These memories pained him most when the stomach was empty, hunger and indignation being twins. With that one windfall of food, five miles out of Paris, he had recovered a modicum of Christian charity. Except for Catherine. Heaven be his aid, he would hate her to the end.

There was of course that affair at the College of Navarre, the prick to his conscience which made flight easier, the strongest excuse he had given the provost to stretch his neck. Fortunately, the provost didn't yet connect him with the crime. Meanwhile Master Villon reflected that justice is a slippery thing, hard to define and rarely enforced. All theft is disorderly and should if possible be avoided. To rob a church is sin. And unprofitable. From the college chapel his share had been one false piece of silver and four

genuine sous. The provost would do his duty as to the four sous, but the worshipper who had offered the bad piece would be free to go to church again.

Because he loved Catherine, he had told her the truth. You can't cheat a girl you really love, and she had been the first to make him wish he were a decent man. But when she learned his danger she drove him into the night, and when he came back desperate she had those ruffians at the door, to beat him up. And Noah Jolis, standing by, laughed. Noah might be sleeping with her now.

The farmer below, having exhausted the cow, was climbing the ladder for hay. Master Villon held his breath, in prudence rather than in fear. The lout would do no worse than swear at him.

The pitchfork touched his left leg and drew an involuntary grunt. His hand went to his knife, by instinct, but the peasant didn't wait. Master Villon heard a thump as the fellow slid down the ladder and hit the ground, then made for the farmhouse, where a dog barked, asking to be unchained.

Master Villon, having finished his sleep for the day, got over the farm wall and plied his legs, the scratched one and the sound, along the river road, towards the south-east.

His head was dizzy by the time he came to the château, two hours before noon. Villages on the way had been few and sleepy-looking, yet he had skirted them all. The château seemed austere, not the sort of place the provost's men would stop at. Master Villon found the gate and pulled the bell-chain.

He could hear the tinkle inside, but no one answered. He pulled once more. The house was, as you might say, dead.

It wouldn't do to climb the front-wall, not in the broad sun, but around at the back, where you might expect a garden, an old apple tree furnished a screen for his gymnastics, and once down among the rose-bushes he aimed straight for the kitchen-door.

Locked tight. All the doors. To his regret Master Villon was forced to enter by an unshuttered window.

At the foot of the stairs, in the main hall, he halloed, to establish an honourable relation with the inmates, but only the echo was roused. Having eased his conscience, he sought the kitchen from the inside; that door also was bolted. Had Master Villon been a man to despair, his weakened knees would have sunk under him altogether.

But while there was still a pencil of strength in his legs he mounted the stairs and inspected the richly garnished bedrooms where those could sleep whose fathers, he reflected, had done their stealing for them.

And in one room he paused, with extra bitterness: a woman's boudoir, laced and silken. A wardrobe for her gowns—a massive dresser full no doubt of whatever went next to her delicate skin—a canopied bed with a blue pillow. He could see the white thing resting there, head cushioned, eyelids closed. Catherine! Damn her!

From the window he learned why the house was silent. In yonder vineyard the servants, male and female, gathered grapes. Among them must be the cook.

So the woman who used this room was on a journey with her husband, and the servants expected no early return. Doubtless a handsome creature with a selfish heart, like Catherine's, and an itch to see the world, and her husband would rather be home but she needed watching. The devil help the man! Master Villon would walk on.

Before he walked, however, he pulled out the trays of the dresser, he being thorough in all his visits, and the contents were what he had supposed, dainty, intimate and troubling—fresh-laundered, scented, neatly folded.

On a pair of black stockings, in the middle of the top drawer, lay a shining gold piece.

What heaven sends, heaven sends! The muscles were working again in Master Villon's legs as he dusted down the road in search of meat and drink.

Midway through the afternoon he found what belonged to him, where the Seine forks with another river, and a tree-shaded town nested between shores. The inn was called 'La Belle Image'. There was a woman's face on the sign. Master Villon removed his hat, ran his hand

over his bald head, stroked his long nose, and recognized the will of God.

When he opened the door the innkeeper, missing baggage and means of transportation, remained at ease in his chair, with his apron on.

'Food!' said Master Villon. 'Beef, red wine, bread!' With that he stepped over the bench by the inn table and thrust his tired legs underneath.

'Money?' said the man in the chair.

Master Villon rang his gold piece on the board, at which music the host rose, as to Gabriel's horn.

'Put your bonnet on the nail yonder,' said he, 'while I fry an egg. There's a roast on the spit, but it won't be cooked through till sundown.'

'An egg,' said Master Villon, ringing the nail with his hat, 'will render appetite endurable without killing it. Let cheese and ale be included in this temporary sustenance.'

In a moment his cheeks were full of bread and cheese, and without ale he would have choked, so ravenously he went at it, but before the egg was fried a coach thundered up to the inn-door, and Master Villon had been too close to his plate to note the direction it came from. Moreover, there was a convoy of three horsemen, well armed.

While the innkeeper was out in front, bowing to this unusual company, Master Villon got his hat from the peg, found a window in the taproom, and sought the picturesque bushes along the river-bank.

Once there, he repented of his haste. Though screened from possible pursuers, he couldn't inquire whether he really was pursued. His shelter had no look-out. Why hadn't he examined the coach-load first? There, someone was hunting him now!

It was a girl of nineteen or twenty, swinging her sun-hat by the ribbon, a reasonably tall young woman with engaging endowments of person and, it seemed, qualities of mind. To Master Villon, who had expected the provost, she was beauty itself. His own quick black eyes observed that hers were brown, wide-set with long lashes. When she saw him she betrayed neither astonishment nor fear nor

boldness. She accepted him with the rest of the sunset-coloured landscape. Her linen gown, plain but well-fitted, hid little of a bosom which Catherine would have envied—a grey dress, a broad white collar, a blue ribbon at her throat. Of what such a body might say to a man, her sincere eyes were not aware. By her hands, had he seen nothing else, he would have known a lady.

'I couldn't wait,' she said.

Master Villon bowed cautiously.

'Father says the river is loveliest at this bend. After dinner it would be too dark.'

Master Villon, who had given the river no study, turned to look at it.

'The dark green of the trees over there, the purple shadows, the dreamy slide of the water—it *is* the best hour, wouldn't you say?'

Master Villon returned her smile. 'I have enjoyed none better.'

'Do you come often?'

He shook his head. 'Seldom.'

'Then you don't live in Corbeil?'

Attending to the name of the town, he let slip the truth. 'My home is in Paris.'

'From choice?' she asked sympathetically, then corrected herself. 'Of course I don't really know Paris.'

'I can see that,' said he.

She laughed. 'Father will have a fit. You stay at the inn?'

They walked back side-by-side.

'How,' she asked, 'do you pass the time, when you are in Paris?'

He couldn't tell her he was a thief. Nor a Master of Arts—not in that dusty jacket, with the knife slung from his belt. 'I lack a reputable profession,' said he. 'I am a bad poet.'

She laughed again, to deride his modesty, but her father at the inn-door was displeased. 'You detain us all from dinner, Louise!'

A tall gentleman with white beard trimmed to a point, neat moustaches, keen eyes.

'I found a poet in the river,' said she, unrebuked.

'My lady honoured me,' said Master Villon, bowing to the tall man. 'François des Loges, at your service.'

The keen eyes fastened on him. 'Which Des Loges?'

'There is but one of me,' said Master Villon, 'born, such as I am, in Paris or near-by.'

'Are you sure?'

'I am not,' said Master Villon. 'I take my mother's word for it.'

The tall man held out his hand, not yet letting go with his eyes. 'The Seigneur de Grigny, at *your* service.'

Master Villon knew the Seigneur de Grigny did not like him, but he had faced adverse opinion before, and just then the innkeeper summoned them to dinner.

'The egg was wasted,' he complained. 'I thought you had left without paying.'

'Your river view,' said Master Villon, 'is worth a dozen eggs.'

'Not to mention,' said the girl, 'the pleasure of conversation with me. Will you sit at our end of the table, master poet?'

From then on the innkeeper thought well of him, whatever may have been in the seigneur's mind, and the girl with her cheerful questions gave him scarcely an interval for soup-swallowing.

'Do you write poems every day, or only while you are at home?'

Master Villon broke off a piece of bread. 'As heaven decides, my lady.'

'What are your poems about? Love?'

The seigneur looked up, to watch his reply.

'I deal with that theme, from time to time. Also with hate.'

'Hate? That wouldn't be poetry!'

Her father interrupted. 'Monsieur des Loges, have you ever eaten at the king's table?'

Master Villon shook his head, his mouth being full.

'You know my friend, d'Estouteville?'

Master Villon swallowed hard. 'Who?'

'The Provost of Paris.'

Knowing the provost entirely too well, Master Villon shied away. 'The Duke of Orleans is a friend of mine, in a sense my protector.'

'Ah!' said the girl. 'There's a poet for you!'

The seigneur smiled, ever so slightly. 'I *thought* we had met before.'

Master Villon let the subject die, more willingly as the girl looked up, ready with another idea.

'The fine folk kill each other, don't they?'

'Where?'

'Paris. Father says so. And the poor starve. Don't they, father?'

The seigneur was examining his knife, which edge to cut with.

'In all cities,' said Master Villon, 'there is mischief. The evil with the good. We have the river, this same river, and the islands, and the markets, and the churches, of course, and the inns, and the streets.'

'Leave nothing out,' said the seigneur. 'Mention the jail.'

'Father!' said the girl, brushing aside the discordant suggestion. 'The streets,' she went on, 'are crooked and crowded.'

'Men and women,' said Master Villon. 'Give me those, and I can live.'

The seigneur's eyes almost lifted, then chose not to.

'The women,' said the girl, pleased with her inexperience for knowing so much. 'You don't need the men. Why did you come away?'

There was no impertinence in her questions, only a cordial turning-over as of a book's pages, to get at the plot quickly.

'In summer,' said he, 'when the town is hot, I take to the road.'

She laughed. 'For peace?'

'Among other things.'

'And even here a woman interrupts!'

'Louise,' said the seigneur, 'talk less and eat. We must be on our journey.'

'Father, if Monsieur des Loges is homeward bound—you are, aren't you?'

He was, so long as the seigneur listened. To be headed openly for Paris might establish credit.

'Then he can ride with us, can't he? There's room in the coach.'

'Unless I walk,' said Master Villon hastily, 'I miss the flavour of travel.'

'You're not walking to Paris?' said the girl. 'Not with your trunk on your back?'

'On these short rambles, my lady, I exchange the convenience of luggage for an easier touch of earth and weather.'

'So far as our paths are the same,' said the seigneur, with unforeseen complacency, 'we shall be glad of your company, Monsieur des Loges.'

Master Villon had met danger too often not to recognize the signs. The tall man must have something up his sleeve.

'At any other time, my lord . . .'

'Now!' said the girl. 'We won't take no.'

So the innkeeper, who had his ear out, came to the side of the seigneur's chair, and at his invitation recited from memory the cost of feeding one gentleman and one daughter, together with one coachman, one footman, and three outriders, who ate in the kitchen, together with five horses, who ate in the stall.

'Monsieur des Loges,' said the seigneur, more affable than the innkeeper himself, 'since you are for the moment my guest, will you give me the pleasure . . .'

'A thousand thanks,' said Master Villon, starting to fish in his pocket, 'but I happen to have . . .'

'There was also,' said the innkeeper, 'an egg, cooked though not consumed. Half a pound of cheese. A quart of ale.'

'Naturally,' said the seigneur, untying his purse. 'Will you now fetch the coach?'

So the horses clattered up, the footman held the door, the girl stepped in, Master Villon with his gold piece unbroken took the seat on her left side, the seigneur the

place of honour on the right. The innkeeper waved them off into the darkness, but no one noticed him.

They rode in silence, because the highway was rough, and for better reasons. Twice the girl spoke, but since it would have been equally appropriate for her father or the poet to reply, each left the privilege to the other.

'Suppose I hadn't cared to look at the river!'

Master Villon was estimating his chances of slipping away. Sooner or later the coach would stop. Should he thank them bravely, affect the light-hearted minstrel, and walk on humming a tune? Or should he dodge behind the coach and run?

'I feel as though we'd been absent a lifetime!'

He wouldn't run. He had no wish to slip away. Her knee was touching his, and if he could reform his impulses so as not to emphasize the pressure, she might continue to believe he was the upholstery.

To steady himself against the jolting of the coach, he put his hand down, where he expected to find the leather cushion between them, but her hand was resting there.

'Pardon!' He drew back from the warm softness, wondering at his flush of shame.

A moment later the seigneur roused himself, leaned forward to look out the window, recognized a gleam in the night.

'We are home,' said he. 'Monsieur des Loges, might we interrupt your walk a second time by providing you with a bed?'

Master Villon saw a trap. 'My lord, your kindness is already beyond measure. With your permission...'

The girl put her hand on his, and held it there.

'My lord, with your permission I will accept an honour which I do not deserve.'

Hardly were the words out of him when the coach wheeled through the gate of the château from which he had stolen the piece of gold.

There was such a twist of conscience around his heart that he turned faint, standing in the great hall at the foot of the stairs, with the servants of the house greeting the

man and his daughter, and the outriders helping in with the bags.

'Home again, and how I've missed my room!' said the girl, running up to be sure it was still there. Master Villon felt the sweat spring on his brow.

'Monsieur des Loges,' said her father, leading the way to a small office behind the stairs, 'if you'll draw the other bench to my desk, we'll share a bottle before we sleep. I like to wash out the dust.'

Master Villon wiped his forehead with his hat, and sat down.

'My dear wife,' continued the seigneur as the butler poured, 'was a Des Loges. Louise des Loges. God rest her soul! I have been curious, ever since we met, as to the nearness of blood.'

The butler having withdrawn, the white-bearded man raised a red glass, and Master Villon, for want of other ingenuity, returned the salute but did not drink.

'So far as the records are known,' the seigneur went on smacking his lips and stroking his moustache, 'no Des Loges was ever a poet. A weakness for the arts was first detected in my side of the family.'

Master Villon heard the girl coming from her room upstairs.

'Until this afternoon I had understood that no Des Loges was ever born in Paris, none at least of the authorized strain. . . . This wine is excellent—or would you prefer...'

Master Villon had counted her slow steps down the stairs, till she stood before them, calm but pale.

'Father, our house has been entered!'

The seigneur looked at her. 'Nonsense! The servants were here. Nonsense!'

'My things have been moved around. The dresser has been searched. A gold piece is gone.'

'Monsieur des Loges will form a sad opinion of us,' said the tall man, rising with no great hurry. 'Shall we examine the evidence, Monsieur des Loges?'

Though he pronounced the name somewhat too often,

as it seemed to Master Villon, there was nothing for it but to follow them up the staircase and look again at what, to his regret, he had already seen.

'In the morning,' said her father, finishing what you might call a surface survey, 'I'll have it out with our people. You'd better not sleep here to-night, Louise.'

'But of course I will! This is my room!'

'Then I'll show Monsieur des Loges to his bed across the hall,' said her father, as docile as you could wish.

'Good night, poet,' said she, quite herself again, holding out both hands for him to kiss. 'I was silly to speak of this accident. Rest well!'

'There's a gown on the bed, Monsieur des Loges, and my other pair of slippers,' said her father, closing the shutters against the night air. 'Shall I send up some fruit, to nibble on?'

Master Villon cleared his throat. 'I need nothing.'

'Good dreams, then. I rise early but my daughter is usually late. Take your time.'

Master Villon put off his shoes and stretched on the bed. The seigneur had removed the candle and the shutters were locked, unless a practised ear could mistake. In the hall below waited, no doubt, the men who had ridden beside the coach.

Yet it wasn't danger that kept him awake, but the gold piece and the girl to whom it belonged. Her hand on his! If she alone still thought generously of him, what might she learn at dawn?

Strange that he should melt before a creature so child-like, he who had shunned innocence and paid tribute rather to what was scarred and scorched. At the goodness which knows little, he had laughed. But lying there on the bed he wished the gold piece were where it should have stayed. He wished he could return with her to the river-bank and admire the sunset. He wished he were—whatever she imagined him to be.

If her father intended to hold him till the Des Loges records could be examined, the provost might happen along with his rope, and if the girl were looking on while they

searched his pockets, she would recognize the money and know he deserved to swing.

If on the other hand he could put the money back, then even if he hanged . . .

Calculating the hours by the growing wear on his patience, Master Villon gave the household ample time to fall asleep. With his shoes in his hand he then drew open his door, inch by inch. Diagonally to the left, if he could remember the precise angle . . .

When his groping fingers told him her door was not entirely closed, he stepped back, as from peril. It couldn't be true! Of another woman, yes, but not of her! How many times had he thanked fortune for a ripe adventure dropped in his hands! But now he wasn't thankful. His heart ached with fear that she might be like all the rest.

Well, he would restore the gold piece and take his chance with the watchmen downstairs. In every house, no matter how timid, one window is overlooked. . . . The dresser would be to the right—the top drawer.

In the darkness he fancied he could trace the figure on the bed. He tried not to breathe. The top drawer came out, noiseless . . . he smoothed down the folded black stockings . . . he laid the coin gently, felt it sink upon the fabric.

To his horror the lovely form sat up in bed, struck a vigorous flint, lighted a candle.

'François Villon,' said the seigneur, bringing his boots down on the floor and rising fully clad, 'the compliment which you meditated, the tribute to my daughter and therefore indirectly to me, is not acceptable. On your rambles, as I observed, you wear no sword, but happily I possess two. Take your choice!'

Master Villon very weary of life at that moment, raised a limp hand and grasped one of the hilts her father was holding towards him in the candle-gloom.

'There is more space in the hall,' said the man, kicking a chair out of the way, 'but it will be a pleasure to kill you here.'

'Father! No!'

They both turned and saw her at the door, candle in hand, clad somewhat hastily in a trailing night-robe.

'Go back to my room, daughter!'

'You mustn't kill him! He meant no harm!'

'The worst rascal in France,' said her father. 'At the inn table I knew him. He accepted my hospitality, then stole here to dishonour you. I was sure he would.'

Master Villon dropped his sword on the girl's bed, with the hilt towards the seigneur. 'I'm not in the mood,' said he. 'Run the blade through me, and be done with it!'

The seigneur reached for the bell-cord. 'You're no gentleman, François Villon. The two swords were for my daughter's sake, and because you happened to borrow my wife's name. Bring a rope,' he went on as the outriders stuck their heads in. 'We'll hang him from the window.'

'Not from *my* window!' pleaded the girl. 'Not from this house! I couldn't live here! I'd see his body swinging outside! I'd...'

'You have your mother's practical sense,' said the seigneur. 'Why soil a good home? François Villon, have the courtesy to be hanged elsewhere. I'll give you six hours' start. It is now past midnight. At seven or eight in the morning my dogs and my men will join you, under some convenient tree.'

The outriders took him by the elbows and rushed him down the stairs.

'My hat,' said Master Villon, 'I left it in the office.'

'His hat!' exclaimed the seigneur. 'Give it to him. His hat!'

When they kicked him through the gate, she was standing by her father, motionless, with the night-robe around her.

Nine o'clock or thereabouts, next morning, she was walking in the rose-garden when a bough cracked in the apple tree over the wall. The fruit that bounced at her feet was Master Villon.

She began to smile, then turned white. 'Father is looking for you.'

'I saw him ride off, my lady.'

'I'm sorry you returned.'

'My lady, do you regret our meeting in the first place?'

For a moment she stared at the ground.

'As father said, you took his hospitality and then you...'

'He was playing a trick,' said Master Villon with some heat. 'He was catching a fly in honey. Hospitality should be too sacred for treacherous use!'

'You and father may debate that, if you wish. I wasn't treacherous. I liked you. You knew I did. Yet you came looking for me where—where you thought I was.'

Master Villon did not laugh at the sequence of her ideas; his mind was on what he must now tell her, and how she would take it.

'You believe, with your father, that I entered your room to possess you? I had no such purpose! The next time I come there, yes, but not last night.'

She put those honest brown eyes on him. 'Why did you come?'

'To return your gold piece.'

For once she flinched, under the full blow of that news.

'That's how it came back! Then you are a thief!'

'I was. Until I met you.'

They stood silent, the longest of moments.

'Why did you return this morning? Just to make certain that I knew the worst?'

'No!' said he, with sudden vigour. 'To learn whether you too enjoy stamping on those who are found out!'

She may not have understood him. Or perhaps she did.

'The gold piece is not important. Not in the slightest!'

'To me,' he said, 'it is. Very!'

He bowed, hat on heart, as though closing the episode for the time being, and she watched while he climbed the wall, took hold of the apple-bough for a safe purchase, and leapt to the turf outside.

*At break of day, when the hawk flaps his wings,
Magnificent in power and in desire,
Breathing loud murmurs, and his mate replies,
Raising feather to feather, fire to fire—
Oh my dear one, our morning kindles bright,
It is the hour—ah, drown my heart with light!
Such is the end—love writes it, and will write—
Even the end for which we are come together.*

*You are the only woman I have loved,
My only lady while I breathe at all,
You are my laurel, my hardly won reward,
And my soul-healing olive if I fall.
Even were I fickle, what could I leave you for,
Oh, most alluring, easiest to adore?
To serve you now, to serve you more and more,
This is the end for which we are come together.*

*When fortune turns unkind, as fortune will,
And I would mourn the health and treasure lost,
Your eyes will blunt the malice of the hour,
And grief will circle feather-light, wind-tossed.
The seed that in this field of love I set
God-prospering, goldlike fruit will soon beget—
Pest! How I talk! And nothing started yet,
Though it's the end for which we are come together.*

*Lady, mark well these words, for they are true.
All that my lips have promised, I will do,
And do it well! I believe the same of you.
This is the end for which we are come together.*

He Would Fit Himself for the Home

WHAT WITH THE LENGTH OF THE JOURNEY, AND A RAINY day or two, and the strain of choosing a safe place to sleep, and the difficulty of finding food without paying for it, nearly a fortnight slipped away before he was in Paris again. Just outside the gates he hailed an obliging farmer, and rode in on the cart.

When at last he approached the cloisters of Saint Benoît the Well-Turned, he considered the best way to enter. In former times, that is a month ago, he would have picked the lock or climbed the ancient vine which anchored itself around his attic window, but on this late afternoon the soundless or stealthy approach was unsuitable. Having returned for no other purpose than to engage his godfather's attention, he now remembered where the front-door was, and knocked loud.

The godfather referred to, Guillaume de Villon, chaplain of Saint Benoît's and professor of canon law, was about to enjoy his evening soup. Rather than interrupt Édouard the cook in the very climax of seasoning, he got up from his chair with a groan which was half blessing and half curse, and went out to see what it was.

When he saw, he first crossed himself, then he drew in Master François by the collar and slammed the door shut, then he shoved him into an adjacent closet or storeroom, where, having bolted the door also, as though they both needed hiding, he embraced the visitor in an afterthought of agitated affection.

'Back again, my son? For the love of God!'

'Father,' said Master François, folding himself down on an empty packing-box, 'I hope your health continues to be what it should.'

Since Guillaume de Villon was prepared at the moment to issue no bulletin, Master François looked him over in silence. What he inspected was a far-off copy of himself, with something of the same black eyes, the same bald dome, though with a shorter nose. If the chaplain was

stout and his hair white, you could account for those natural differences by the thirty years which separated them, the good priest being, in Master François's opinion, an old man. All of fifty-five.

'They are searching for you,' said the chaplain.

'Don't I know!' said Master François.

'The provost went through the house but yesterday. You are to be hanged at sight.'

'The provost exaggerates,' said Master Villon. 'The hanging was commuted to exile.'

'That was the earlier case,' said the chaplain, 'the Sermoise affair, and even so, you were not to return, under pain of death. But there's a new charge against you. The king's treasurer, the Seigneur de Grigny . . .'

'Is he the king's treasurer?' asked Master François. 'Of course—I didn't place him.'

'He says you entered his house.'

'At his invitation. A gentleman of the grand manner. I hope to visit him again.'

The sweat on the chaplain's forehead was not caused altogether by lack of ventilation in the space where he and his visitor were assembled.

'Are you hungry, as usual?'

'For two days,' said Master François, 'I have eaten nothing, but as you say, that's a habit with me, hardly worth discussing.'

'Have you no money?'

'None whatever.'

'Do you come to me for that?'

'You know better!'

'I believe I do,' said the chaplain. 'Your motives are rarely obvious.'

'When I left,' said Master François, 'I promised you to reform.'

'I offered you a purse,' said the chaplain.

'Your farewell remarks,' said Master François, 'stung me to pride, and pride, as you teach, is a sin. Moreover, that promise of correct conduct was made to you. I have now made it to myself, which is more binding. I find no longer

satisfactory those casual appropriations which normally supply a foot-traveller's wants.'

'What else brought you back?'

'A woman.'

'God forgive us!' said the chaplain. 'There too you promised.'

'She is not like the others,' said Master François. 'My love for once is pure. That also adds to my distress.'

'Who is she?'

'Would it be delicate,' said Master François, 'to publish the name before I have proposed marriage?'

'Will she marry a man who may be hanged?' inquired the chaplain. 'Besides, you are registered as a student for holy orders.'

'Father,' said Master François, 'having seen her, I give up the priesthood.'

'Ah, you do, do you?'

'My thought,' said Master François, 'was that I would resume my residence here with you, face criticism with courage, and re-establish my character.'

'You can't!' said the chaplain. 'Not in my house!'

'She might be won more easily,' Master François continued, 'if she saw me against the background from which I have sprung.'

'The provost will see you first.'

'My room in the attic,' said Master François, 'is it still unoccupied?'

'I will give you all the gold I have,' said the chaplain, 'if you will go at once!'

'She herself,' said Master François, 'is of the best blood in the land.'

The chaplain was reaching down into the pocket of his cassock.

'My further thought,' said Master François, 'was that I would call upon the provost and come to terms with him. That is, with him or with his wife. Before I left Paris I sent her a little poem by way of thanks for successful intercession. I think she must have liked it. Her maiden name was worked into the line-beginnings, acrostic-fashion.'

The chaplain pulled out a fat money-bag. 'Take this,' said he, 'and go! Among liars you are God's masterpiece.'

'Had you offered the purse for its own sake,' said the poet, keeping his hands clasped, 'I should have been able to accept it with humility and gratitude, both proper in the life of virtue, but since you make the gift appear a tribute to mendacity, I must decline. What I have told you happens to be truth.'

'I believe nothing you say,' interrupted the chaplain, 'but I would help you escape punishment. Take the gold, leave the city, do what the devil compels, so it be far away!'

'Another thought,' said Master François. 'Since the lady is of honourable birth, I have become interested in my own father. Who was he? Who and what?'

The chaplain's eyes were glassy. 'Your mother's husband...'

Master Villon smiled, ever so slightly. 'That's not the man I asked about. He was invented, I understand, when I was born. I speak of my father. What was his profession?'

They faced each other. Then the chaplain held out the purse. 'Will you take it and go?'

'How *is* my mother?' said Master François. 'Have you seen her lately?'

'You are beyond love or prayers,' said the chaplain. 'God have mercy on me!'

'I'll accept the money,' said Master Villon, in a softer tone, stretching out his hand, 'if no conditions cramp it.'

The chaplain withdrew the bag out of reach. 'It's not to be spent on Catherine.'

'Catherine? She betrayed me, as you know! If we meet, I'll kill her.'

'Promise *not* to meet! Leave the city at once!'

Master François tucked the purse inside his jacket. 'I spread my thanks at your feet, father, but having spoken so much truth I am less humble than I could wish. Peace be with you! I know the way out.'

At that hour of dusk good men were busy with their meals and the street of Saint James was deserted. If he

hurried southward he could reach the city walls before the gate closed for the night, and the guard, having passed him in for a country fellow market-bound, would let him trudge back to the fields. That is, if he hurried.

Instead, he walked towards the river, over the bridge, past the lesser Châtelet where Provost d'Estouteville locked up poets and scholars, then to the middle of the island, between churches and other respectable edifices, turning at last sharply to the left along a crooked street.

The unwelcome name of Catherine had suggested Noah Jolis, equally disliked, and Noah, unworthy to be linked with pig or dog, was closely related by marriage as well as by nature with Robin Turgis, tavern-keeper and treasury spy, and Turgis spun his web of evil in the Pine Cone, with its absurdly painted sign and its sour cellar-smell, and the Pine Cone, against which, taken by itself, Master François had no grudge, emphasized the idea of food, which already was on his mind.

In the darkness he heard the sign creaking with the breeze, and stumbling down the familiar stones he kicked the door open.

Before a bright hearth a capon roasted. Before the capon sat Catherine. Before Catherine, across the table, sat Noah Jolis, she leaning sociably, he sprawling sympathetically. Near his elbow stood a jug of wine, into which he, and perhaps she, had probed too deep. At the moment he was unbuttoning the front of her dress, and her state was such that she admired his wit.

Watching this by-play of the heart, Robin Turgis was resting his person on the account-desk at the tap, like a preacher clinging to his pulpit.

At sight of Master François they curled up, as it were, in an abrupt concentration—three separate spiders, at home to a fly.

Master François was sorry he had come, but he removed his cap, bowed to the company, stepped over to the table and found a chair between Catherine and Noah, facing Turgis. If he loosened his knife in his belt, they might think it was from habit, for the sweet light of friendship

He Examines His Heart

IT WAS MASTER VILLON'S INTENTION TO GO STRAIGHT to his mother's house. That was before breakfast. But having descended the staircase of Saint Benoît's cloisters and faced the chaplain, his godfather, whose sleep had been sweet in the supposition that the cloisters were well rid of him, and having accepted patiently Édouard's upbraidings for last night's inroad on the larder, Master Villon got at his morning food, reflecting on the strange wisdom of God which permits the prickings of the soul to let up as hunger is satisfied.

He still wished to see his mother, but he was less hurried.

'I shall grieve to see your end,' said his godfather, watching him eat.

'The provost is out of town,' said Master Villon.

'But the hangman isn't.'

'The processes of the law are orderly,' said the poet, making his lips clean with the back of his hand, and cleaning his hand on the back of his breeches. 'Until the provost returns, nothing serious will happen, and meanwhile I'll be gone.'

'You will go now?' said the chaplain hopefully.

'In a day or so. And the hangman has nothing to do with it. I'm innocent.'

'For all that,' said the chaplain, 'keep yourself close. Tomorrow the moon is dark—slip away then.'

Master Villon rose and put on his hat, which he had used to cushion the cloister bench.

'For the love of God!' said the chaplain. 'Not in broad daylight!'

'From now on,' said Master Villon, 'I meditate none but good deeds. I must pay my mother a visit.'

'It's neither necessary nor wise.'

'Won't she be glad to see me?'

'Don't go,' said his godfather.

The excellent man was so serious about it that inevitably

he strengthened Master Villon's intention and kindled some others.

'I'll step around and have a word with Catherine.'

'That drab again!' said the chaplain, letting his priestly character slip off him. 'She betrayed you once!'

'I wish to remind her of it,' said the poet, escaping through the door before the paternal hand could clutch him.

It was a fine day, and his real thoughts were of Louise, and his first sight of her by the river at Corbeil, and their brief talk in the garden at Grigny. His true love, from now on. He was inclined to sing. Yet he turned the corner into the street of the Harp, to the door where Catherine lodged.

Stretched on his bed in the bad hours of the night, he had wondered why he ever cared for her. Now that he was on his feet again, he would go and see.

She was unprepared for visitors, not being an early riser, and the narrow closet she slept in offended his taste, with the château of Grigny fresh in his eyes. Louise kept her garments in wardrobe and dresser. Catherine, poor wretch, let hers rest over the back of the one chair or on the floor, when she wasn't wearing them. As at this moment.

Her grey eyes were haggard, he noticed, her high cheekbones lacked paint, but her black hair, tousled or not, was beautiful. The heart, he considered, asks much more than thick black hair.

'François!' she cried, stretching out her arms to him.

'If you don't mind,' said he, keeping his hat on. 'I'll use the side of the bed.'

'Here!' said she, making space at the pillow-end. Master Villon settled himself against the footboard.

'If you hadn't come, François, I would have looked for you!'

He saw fit not to answer the smile she gave him. 'You and Noah are lovers.'

'Oh, François!' she cried. 'You are the one I love! I couldn't say it last night!'

'You did your best,' said he, 'considering that Noah was there—considering also that you had just learned I had a little money again!'

'Margot!' pleaded Turgis. 'He says he has come into fortune, and he is in the treasurer's favour.'

'Call the police, Noah,' said the fat woman.

'Stay here, Noah,' said the tavern-keeper. 'We'll keep the game in our own hands. He says he spent some hours at the treasurer's home.'

'At Grigny,' said François.

'Did you meet his daughter?' asked Margot.

'I did,' said Master François, trying to keep to himself the twinge in his heart, but Catherine was watching.

'She's in Paris now,' said Turgis, as though he and his wife had planned the dialogue together.

Caution to the winds, Master François stared wide-eyed and Catherine knew the worst.

'The Seigneur de Grigny never leaves her at home,' said the treasury spy. 'When he tracked you here he brought her along. They're staying with the provost. We'll just walk to the other bank and ask for a word with them, and if they don't hang you I'll return the gold and feed you for a year.'

'You have no appointment with the provost, have you?' asked Master François. 'I have. I stopped here on my way, to pay a debt. Now I'm to report one or two matters to the provost and the treasurer, and they've permitted me to offer my homage to the ladies.'

They gaped, unbelieving.

'It was a meal you came for,' said Turgis.

'I was hungry,' said Master François, 'and I still am, but I didn't trust what Margot would feed me.'

'The police, Noah!' said the fat woman.

Master François made ready to depart. 'I'll be late if we gossip more. Let Robin come by my side. When he sees the welcome I get, he can run home to you, Margot, for comfort!'

Turgis reached for his hat and furnished himself with a heavy staff.

'A quiet night to you all,' said Master François, at the bottom of the front-steps.

'She can't have you,' said Catherine. 'I won't let her.'

It occurred to Master François that such a threat meant much or little, as time would disclose, and further debate would postpone the sight of Louise. He turned his back on Catherine, with her wrath and her jealousy, and mounted the steps to the dark street, the tavern-keeper close at heel, two shadows matching their strides, first to the right as far as the river, then doubling to the right again, then left across the bridge, then right, towards the Célestin quarter, where Master François's mother lived, then left once more, to the portal of a grim house, with hinges as big as a ship's anchor.

'I'm to do the talking,' said Master François, 'and you may take the news back to Margot and Noah, when they invite me in.'

'When!' said Robin Turgis.

But they did invite him, somewhat to the surprise of Master François himself. At least he had counted on no cordiality. But when the provost's man answered the knock and learned it was François Villon, to call on the family and all the guests, the fellow was hardly gone when he brought word again that François Villon would be received in the upper hall, where the ladies were enjoying a log on the hearth, and though Provost d'Estouteville and the Seigneur de Grigny had been called forth on an errand, they would be home any minute now.

To the evidence of so magnificent a welcome the tavern-keeper ruefully surrendered. 'You'll eat me out of my trade!'

'Your wager,' Master François reminded him, 'included my gold.'

With the provost's man holding the door open, Robin Turgis walked off in the stream of light.

'Give my love to Margot,' Master François called after him, then pulled off his hat and went in, brushing his bald head with the palm of his hand and wishing he had washed before he came.

Ambroise de Loré, the provost's famous wife, waited for him, alone. He felt a quick pang, missing Louise. Not that Ambroise, standing there in the firelight, would oc-

cupy less than a man's eyesight and, if he were otherwise heart-free, his thoughts. Those who have remembered her say first of all that she was seductive, a broad term conveying nothing unfavourable. They say next that she was high-spirited, her beauty being so secure that she could afford to laugh. They add that though her generosity bordered at moments on the reckless, she made up for it in long intervals by planting her feet on the ground. She was tall, and her mouth was large.

'François, you are a fool!' she said, by way of greeting. 'Will you never learn?'

'Did you like the poem?' said he.

'Did you stop in,' said she, 'for a literary opinion, or to catch a glimpse of Louise?'

'The poem,' said he, 'was my gift to you.' He stood before her, hat in hand. She smiled as their eyes met.

'The poem for me, the visit for Louise.'

'Ambroise,' said he, 'will you implore me to sit down?'

'Oh, you can't stay! My husband will be here, and the seigneur.'

'I wish to see them!'

'They wish to find *you*! François, my friend, you've walked into the noose. The Seigneur de Grigny knows what bait to use.'

He helped himself to a chair. 'I'll stay till I learn whether Louise would lend herself to a trap. My conscience is clear—that is, so far as concerns her.'

Ambroise seated herself on a low hassock by the fire. 'My husband read the poem. I can't cure his suspicion a second time. I repeat, you are a fool.'

'So be it,' said Master François, 'but I owed you thanks for the pleading which saved me, as well as for . . .'

'Thanks!' said Ambroise. 'I beg your life, and you thank me by swearing in verse that I am the lady of your heart, and love writes—something or other—in his book, and this is the end for which we are together. I ask you, what would my husband think that meant?'

'I inscribed it to him,' said Master François. 'It's supposed to give his point of view.'

'Go now before he returns,' said she, rising. 'Unless his heart stops beating he will hang you.'

'Where is Louise?' said he, crossing one leg over the other.

'I told her to keep her room till you were gone. Or until you were carried out. She knows your death is ordered.'

'I love her,' said Master François.

For all her good-humour, Ambroise de Loré, we are told, had eyes that could flash. 'Love? You?'

Master François stood up and spoke into those eyes of hers. 'At the Judgement Day, Ambroise, I shall explain myself thus: many women have I worshipped, for a night or an hour. Of most of them the reward should be in heaven. But when the hour had struck, the worship was finished and the congregation went home, with charitable sentiments, in at least one case. That was worship, not love. I love Louise. I never loved before. Why, if your husband is away, did you ask me to come in?'

She smiled. 'Consider my position. The guard will tell him. What if I let you escape?'

'Then, when you advised me to leave, it was to be arrested at the door?'

She sat in a high-backed chair and looked up at him. 'You once knew a safe way out. François, is it delicate of you, this turning to me for aid to win Louise?'

'I asked for no aid,' said he. 'I cannot win her. But I love her.' As he spoke, he strode back and forth the length of the rug before the fire. 'If I could undo what I've done, I might have a roof of my own, my own hearth, with—I dream of it—with her. A door of my own, and peace behind it, and nothing in my heart to fear a loud knock. With her to talk and plan and watch the folly of the world outside. We would have children, and they'd love her. Perhaps they'd be proud of me. She makes me think of that.'

He paced on, having said all.

'I am sorry, François. I wish you had what you desire.'

He looked at her quickly and thought how like her it was to say it, and how sincere, and how jealous at the same time she probably was.

'I'll clear my name with Louise,' said he. 'That at least. Her father misinterprets my going to her room.'

'The story he tells does sound like you!'

'I admitted I had thought of stealing, to get food, but nothing beyond that.'

There was a footstep on the stairs. 'Go now!' whispered Ambroise. 'Run!'

She was at his elbow, pushing him towards the other door.

'I stay,' said he, leaning back for balance.

Ambroise pushing, Master François leaning back, so Louise saw them when she came in, wearing a gown of silken blue, her wide eyes frightened. Ambroise let him go, and he straightened up and bowed.

'I could bear it no longer,' she said simply. 'The silence was endless. I had to know what happened.'

'Master François Villon,' said Ambroise, 'desires to repair his reputation with your father and my husband. Since they are absent, I wish he would go home. I was trying to push him out.'

'Is that all?' said the girl, resting limp on the hassock.

'My interest in your father is slight,' said Master François. 'I hoped for this sight of you. Our conversation in the garden that morning was hurried.'

'When was that?' said Ambroise. 'Louise, you didn't tell me.'

'Madame d'Estouteville,' said the poet, 'I entered the château in search of something to eat. At the moment the Seigneur de Grigny, indeed his entire household, happened to be absent. In a room which I afterwards discovered to be mademoiselle's, in an upper drawer . . .'

'May I interrupt?' said the girl. 'Would you take offence if I asked a question? You look hungry this very minute.'

'My lady,' said he, 'the hunger I suffer from is of another kind. You put into me a reasonable wish to live no more in the streets or on the highway. When you appeared that evening on the river-bank, outside the Belle Image, I acquired wisdom merely by looking at you. Had I more moments like this, I could live through my eyes.'

'Why not be practical?' said the girl. 'The last time I saw you, you were climbing a wall with the aid of an apple tree. The last time before that my father's men were kicking you out of our front-door. Now I come to Paris, since father insists, and the first thing I learn is that the visit is for your sake, and you must be hanged. After that, what you say of my appearance is rather bookish, isn't it?'

'Master François Villon,' said Ambroise, 'I repeat, you should go while the path is clear.'

'I wish you *would* go,' said the girl. 'Truly, I wish it!'

'From that upper drawer, Madame d'Estouteville,' said he, 'I removed a gold piece. A few hours later, along the track of heaven's will, I was in the château again, this time by invitation, with the gold piece still in my pocket. Having now the honour of mademoiselle's acquaintance, I restored what was hers, she having first restored me to the way of grace. At least, to the desire for it. Her father found me in her room, and thought what gentlemen think.'

'In another minute,' said the provost's wife, 'I shall not be able to answer for you. The guards have been told . . .'

'Madame d'Estouteville,' said he, 'the suspicions of the Seigneur de Grigny placed me in a dilemma, upon which I should like your comment. Would mademoiselle here prefer to believe that I entered her room to restore stolen goods, which is evidence of virtue, or would she rather think I went there to take liberties with her person, which is sometimes supposed to be evidence of love?'

'The guards,' said Madame d'Estouteville, 'expect you to leave by the door, and when you do, they'll arrest you. If you don't leave promptly, they will inquire into what you and I are doing—and Mademoiselle de Grigny. They'll arrest you here.'

'Upon most women,' said Master François, 'I should assume that the evidence of love would create the happier impression, but to Mademoiselle de Grigny I told the truth.'

'Master François Villon,' said Ambroise, 'is there one woman you have not deceived?'

'There is one.'

'This is too much!' said she. 'You refuse to leave? You challenge me?'

'I shall stay till your husband and the seigneur return. I am here to clear a little of the mud from my name. Let them hang me if they insist, but should I live, it must be no longer as fugitive or vagabond. The moment the provost comes in . . .'

'Why,' said the girl, 'he may not get back for days! He and father thought you were still in the country. They are searching for you there!'

'Then I can live,' said Master François, 'at least an hour more.'

Ambroise walked towards the stairway, and turned at the threshold, with her hand clutching the brocaded curtains.

'Against my will I must summon the guard. To save Louise, to save myself, I must. Will you go?'

'Can he find a way out?' asked Louise.

'He can. He knows it well.'

The girl came close to him. 'If I ask you, will you go?'

He bowed. 'Not for another hour, mademoiselle. An hour at least.'

With a gesture of despair, Ambroise disappeared. The fright came back to the girl's eyes.

'They *do* mean to hang you! Why do you make it easy for them?'

'Because I cannot hope for your love. For a moment I have seen you. Nothing better is left than to die here.'

She reached up and kissed him. 'Don't die! Go!'

He found the streets empty and the walking smooth, in spite of hunger, as he crossed the bridge to the island and the second bridge to the street of Saint James, and on up to the cloisters of Saint Benoît the Well-Turned. The old vine served once more as a ladder to his attic window, and when he descended again to the kitchen inside, he offered thanks for the bread in the box and the sausage in the larder, and climbing back in stocking-feet, hands and mouth full, to the bed on which his boyhood had slept and dreamed, he considered the probable astonishment of Édouard on the morrow, and what face his father-in-God would wear.

THE BALLADE OF SMALL MATTERS

I look for flies around the milk,

By change of wind I know the weather,

If a man is dressed in rags or silk

I read the tree and the fruit together.

I know the worker from the drone,

Beauty in bud from beauty blown,

I know the skeleton, bone by bone.

Ah, if I only knew myself!

I know the doublet by the collar,

I know the friars by the barrel,

I know the master by his scholar,

Nuns by their fare-you-well apparel.

I know the patter of knave and cheat,

Wisdom's hunger, folly's meat,

I know the sour wine from the sweet.

Ah, if I only knew myself!

I know a horse, I know a mule,

And just how much their backs will stand,

I know Jeannette, and Joan, and Jule,

A smile and a kiss and an itching hand.

Sleep I know, and dream, and mirth,

The woe Bohemia brought to birth,

The power of Rome, to rule the earth.

Ah, if I only knew myself!

Prince, every state man passes through—

The healthy red, the pallid blue,

Death at the last—I know that too.

Ah, if I only knew myself!

He Examines His Heart

IT WAS MASTER VILLON'S INTENTION TO GO STRAIGHT to his mother's house. That was before breakfast. But having descended the staircase of Saint Benoît's cloisters and faced the chaplain, his godfather, whose sleep had been sweet in the supposition that the cloisters were well rid of him, and having accepted patiently Édouard's upbraidings for last night's inroad on the larder, Master Villon got at his morning food, reflecting on the strange wisdom of God which permits the prickings of the soul to let up as hunger is satisfied.

He still wished to see his mother, but he was less hurried.

'I shall grieve to see your end,' said his godfather, watching him eat.

'The provost is out of town,' said Master Villon.

'But the hangman isn't.'

'The processes of the law are orderly,' said the poet, making his lips clean with the back of his hand, and cleaning his hand on the back of his breeches. 'Until the provost returns, nothing serious will happen, and meanwhile I'll be gone.'

'You will go now?' said the chaplain hopefully.

'In a day or so. And the hangman has nothing to do with it. I'm innocent.'

'For all that,' said the chaplain, 'keep yourself close. Tomorrow the moon is dark—slip away then.'

Master Villon rose and put on his hat, which he had used to cushion the cloister bench.

'For the love of God!' said the chaplain. 'Not in broad daylight!'

'From now on,' said Master Villon, 'I meditate none but good deeds. I must pay my mother a visit.'

'It's neither necessary nor wise.'

'Won't she be glad to see me?'

'Don't go,' said his godfather.

The excellent man was so serious about it that inevitably

he strengthened Master Villon's intention and kindled some others.

'I'll step around and have a word with Catherine.'

'That drab again!' said the chaplain, letting his priestly character slip off him. 'She betrayed you once!'

'I wish to remind her of it,' said the poet, escaping through the door before the paternal hand could clutch him.

It was a fine day, and his real thoughts were of Louise, and his first sight of her by the river at Corbeil, and their brief talk in the garden at Grigny. His true love, from now on. He was inclined to sing. Yet he turned the corner into the street of the Harp, to the door where Catherine lodged.

Stretched on his bed in the bad hours of the night, he had wondered why he ever cared for her. Now that he was on his feet again, he would go and see.

She was unprepared for visitors, not being an early riser, and the narrow closet she slept in offended his taste, with the château of Grigny fresh in his eyes. Louise kept her garments in wardrobe and dresser. Catherine, poor wretch, let hers rest over the back of the one chair or on the floor, when she wasn't wearing them. As at this moment.

Her grey eyes were haggard, he noticed, her high cheekbones lacked paint, but her black hair, tousled or not, was beautiful. The heart, he considered, asks much more than thick black hair.

'François!' she cried, stretching out her arms to him.

'If you don't mind,' said he, keeping his hat on. 'I'll use the side of the bed.'

'Here!' said she, making space at the pillow-end. Master Villon settled himself against the footboard.

'If you hadn't come, François, I would have looked for you!'

He saw fit not to answer the smile she gave him. 'You and Noah are lovers.'

'Oh, François!' she cried. 'You are the one I love! I couldn't say it last night!'

'You did your best,' said he, 'considering that Noah was there—considering also that you had just learned I had a little money again!'

She drew back from the bitter words, but smiled resolutely. 'So long as you are here, say what you please.'

Because his thin fingers liked something to play with, he drew the knife from his belt, and balanced the point on his thumb.

'We're meeting for the last time,' said he.

'Oh, no!' said she, still smiling but watching the knife.

'The Pine Cone was no place to have it out,' said he, 'not with Robin and Margot listening. It might have discouraged Noah. But if there was ever a bad woman, it's you, and if I fall into your hands again, God have no mercy on me!'

She leaned forward, in a white fierceness. 'I never told the secret—it was Noah!'

'That may well be,' he answered. 'I whispered to you what I had done; you passed it on to him; he warned the police.'

She sank back on her pillow, cunning rather than frightened. 'You aren't angry with me for that.'

'When I came to your door again, those fellows with their staves nearly killed me.'

She laughed. 'You are simple as a child, François! You are reaching for a magnificent excuse to desert me. You have found another woman. Also, I know who she is.'

He dropped the knife on the bed, then picked it up again.

'If you think I don't know, I'll say her name.'

Master Villon held the knife by the handle. 'I prefer not to hear it from your lips.'

'I guessed who she was, from what Margot said.'

'If I hadn't met her,' said he, 'I would have cut your throat.'

Catherine's grey eyes turned sharp. 'It isn't worth while now, I suppose?'

'It is not worth while.'

'Since you have seen her, you can't even hate me?'

'Not even hate you.'

'You get your revenge by telling me?'

He put his knife away and rose from the bed. 'I wish

I knew why I came, but I think it was to say good-bye. I doubt if it was for revenge. I once thought well of you, you know, and if any affection still lingered, it might be awkward.'

'She might be awkward, or I might?'

'But nothing remains,' said he, 'and we can part with quiet minds.'

Catherine looked up at him with just the right flicker of sadness. 'You keep nothing? Not even the ashes? I don't blame you. I never deserved you. Run along to her now. May she make you happy!'

He should have run along, but her contrite and broken heart seemed to require a sympathizing exit.

'Perhaps it wasn't your fault,' said he. 'We were ill-suited to each other. I never called out the best in you.'

'François,' she pleaded. 'Embrace me for the last time! Now!'

'I don't think I'd better,' said he. 'Our farewells are already taken.'

'I'll come to-night,' said she, 'to your dear little room in the cloisters.'

It was evident to him that the girl was a fool. 'If there's one thing would make me happy, it's a visit from you at Saint Benoît's, with my godfather on my neck!'

'To-night, François!'

'Never!'

'Then some other night?'

He had reached the foot of the stairs before she called him back. He could see just her head and a slant of her white shoulders leaning out the door.

'Some other night, François—perhaps?'

Since it would help her to let go more easily—and since he would certainly be out of Paris before she came...

'Perhaps.'

Hardly had he taken ten steps when he knew it was the wrong answer, and marvelled at himself for making it, but the streets were stirring, towards midday, and he needed his mind against the provost's men, those unpredictable strollers.

The most prudent path lay through Parchment Street, through the schools, then down Saint James and across the bridge to the City, then right, just before you came to the Pine Cone, past the hospitals and Notre-Dame, then over Red Bridge to Saint Louis's Island, then by Mary's Bridge to the Célestin quarter, where his mother was doubtless busy with her washing, and would be surprised to see him.

She was, in fact. She had thought him dead and had spent precious sous for a mass. Later she had heard he was reprieved but in exile, and grateful that the mass had done so much good, she had slipped into Saint Paul's, many a time, to pray for her uncertain boy, whatever remote parts he might be disturbing.

Now with the suds on her knuckles she opened the door and saw his ghost.

'François! For the love of God!'

Thereupon she began to cry, which he disliked because it moistened his own eyes. To encourage her he kissed both cheeks and rubbed the back of her head.

'What mischief is it now?' said she, managing her voice.

'Yourself and nothing worse,' said he. 'You're handsomer than ever!'

'Brat!' said she, drying her cheeks with her skirt.

'I happened to be in town, and thought of you,' said he, stepping inside and taking the bench by the wash-tub. 'How are you? Let me look.'

She took off his hat for him and laid it carefully on the table with the laundered things. Then she pulled up a stool, and the two sat with their hands on their knees, facing each other.

He might say she was handsome, now that she wasn't talking and you couldn't miss a tooth or so. She had his black eyes, but larger, and his competent nose, but more graceful and less thin, and she made you think, as he did, that nothing life offered would be overlooked. But she had kept for herself a more obvious warmth of heart, and sorrow more than toil made her too soon old.

'Mother,' said he, 'if you've changed at all, it's for the better.'

'You're a strange man,' said she. 'Will I ever understand you?' *1896-1897*

'If I understood myself!' said he. 'Between what I intend and what gets done, I'm racked apart—so I came to you.'

'Where have you been?'

'It's a long story,' said he. 'A moment ago I was talking with Catherine.'

'That slut again? Will you never keep your hands off her?'

'Don't waste your breath on the creature,' said he. 'Tell me this now—how does a man make love to a good woman?'

'What a question!'

'So I think,' said he.

'A good woman, did you say?'

'The best in the world, and a great lady.'

'Then she's not for you.'

'I fear you're right,' said he, 'but meanwhile I would do what I can, the way she might think I was a good man, and a great gentleman.'

'You have the mark of yourself on you,' said she. 'If she's a good woman, you'll never deceive her—not unless she has lost her wits as well as her heart.'

'She has lost nothing as yet,' said he, 'and I'll court her the right way or not at all. How is it done?'

She studied him, trying to get behind the question, as he would have tried. 'I know nothing of the world—I'm not a great lady.'

'But my father was a gentleman. How did he make love to you?'

'Will you ask your own mother that?'

He thought he saw tears coming again.

'You're a good woman, and I've little doubt my father was . . .'

'He was a good man,' said she, lowering her voice.

'Mother,' said François Villon, 'who was he?'

It took her off her guard, and he was sorry for her, holding on to a desperate calmness. 'He was a good man.'

'Still is. He became a priest, did he not?'
Her hands clutched together, nails biting into palm.
'I'll ask one thing more,' said he. 'Did he think it a sin?'

She swallowed hard. 'He did, indeed!'

'And did you?'

'What are you after now?' she cried. 'I loved him!'

He had never before heard passion from her lips, and he kept silent, awed, until she smiled. She could smile as suddenly and as wistfully as he.

'You're the queerest son a woman could have, and may God forgive me!'

'Mother, if you go to hell for it now, will you be sorry?'

Her smile broadened. 'I'd be sorry to go to hell.'

'But not that you had your joy?'

The answer was torn out of her. 'It's all I ever had!'

He sat with his eyes on the floor.

'François—why did you ask me this?'

'To know myself, mother—to know myself! If I knew what went into me at the beginning, I might know why I am—as I am.'

The tears were in his eyes now, to his disgust, and she got up to put a kiss on his forehead. He patted her shoulder and went looking for his hat.

'Since I met her,' he said, 'I've wished to start again and be what she deserves, but the other half clogs the best of me. What I used to do, now seems wrong...'

'That's your father!'

'But I can't pass an open door without wanting to take a look inside.'

'God forgive us all!' said she.

'Mother, it's the part of me I like best!'

She followed him to the door. 'Is it your wish to marry her?'

'That or nothing.'

She shook her head—then smiled at him as he went off, and waited till he waved back, at the turn of the corner.

He was asking himself why he had not seen her more often, and what aid, if any, his godfather gave her, and

why a man should be furnished board and lodging, only for saying his prayers and repenting of his sins, while the woman must bend her back over the tub, to keep alive. He was about to consider what he himself had or had not done for her, when a voice hailed him at Red Bridge, and it was Montigny, with Guy Tabarie at his elbow.

'She was right—there he is!'

'You? I thought you were gone!'

'No,' said Montigny. 'The provost's in the country, as you may have heard, and Guy and I have a brace of ideas which need only your genius...'

'I've done with theft, and all that,' said Master Villon, striking on his way past Notre-Dame.

'Now, how did you think of theft?' said Guy, keeping up with him. 'I've met a man from Paray-le-Monial...'

'No Burgundian for me!' said Master Villon, walking a trifle faster.

'What's the haste? You'll like Peter Merchant when you meet him.'

'We shan't meet.'

'He has some agreeable notions, François,' said Montigny. 'We'll bring him to whatever tavern you say—how about the Mule, near your godfather's church? See the fellow and give us your opinion.'

No one could be more polite than Montigny, when occasion demanded, and though Master Villon at that moment had as little mind for these reckless accomplices as for Catherine, yet habit held. He couldn't shake them off—not at once. Montigny was a gentleman, a rascal but trailing fineness, to be envied for his ease of speech, his simple confident tone, his way of wearing his clothes as though he hadn't noticed them, his smooth clear cheeks, his graceful hands. Guy had the vulgarity which charms, the rank spirits of the street, the courage bred of struggle to keep the chin above the gutter.

Master Villon had Louise in his thoughts, his mother's voice in his ear, but he slowed his pace, as many a time before, just because Montigny used the style of courtesy which must have an answer in kind.

'What are Peter Merchant's notions?'

'There's a priest in Angers,' said Guy, 'who has money. That condition, Peter Merchant thinks, should be cured.'

'Haven't we enough rope around our necks already, if they find out about the College of Navarre?'

'They won't,' said Guy. 'If they hadn't given it up, the provost wouldn't have left town.'

'Peter Merchant,' said Master Villon, 'smells like a spy.'

'Would there were more like him,' said Guy. 'Half a glass makes him foolish. You should have seen him last evening, at the Pine Cone!'

'When? What hour?'

'Midnight, wasn't it, Montigny? We didn't mark the clock. We sang the rhyme about the young priest confessing the duchess, and he asked what poet composed that beautiful ode, and we said you did.'

'Then he wasn't so drunk,' said Master Villon.

'He was a riot! We dropped ale down his throat when he snored. God, how he choked!'

Master Villon was not amused. 'You two will hang yet.'

'Margot said you had just been there.'

'Bless her kind heart!' said Master Villon. 'She told Peter Merchant?'

'That's when he snored.'

The three walked in silence, across the bridge now, up Saint James. A heavy coach rattled past them.

'That's the provost's carriage,' said Guy. 'When the cat's away! I wonder what his wife is up to!'

Master Villon walked in a silence all his own.

'François,' said Montigny, 'that priest in Angers ...'

'I'll not meddle with it,' said Master Villon. 'Why should a priest have money? Or if he really has, why should Peter Merchant ask someone else to steal it?'

'He has respect for the art,' said Guy. 'The priest is an educated man and a miser. Peter Merchant thinks he's your uncle.'

Master Villon swung around on Montigny. 'Did I ever play such a trick on *you*?'

'It was he who mentioned the name.'

'We knew you only by hearsay,' Guy went on, pleased by the thought of his own cleverness. 'You were a brilliant talent but unreliable, and we moved only in an honest world. Come on, François, do something for your friends! Visit your uncle! Peter gets a tenth, we take a third, and you keep the rest.'

They stood in the street, with Saint Benoît's cloisters around the corner. 'Peter Merchant knows far too much,' said Master Villon. 'My godfather *has* a brother in Angers.'

'I should call it fate,' said Guy. '... our need of gold, your need of a journey, the happy family connections.'

'I don't rob the family.'

'Since when?'

Master Villon turned to Montigny. 'I've no confidence in Peter Merchant. What's he doing in Paris?'

'Looking for you,' said Guy.

Master Villon reached for his knife.

'Don't listen to Guy,' said Montigny. 'He isn't sober yet. He and Peter.'

Master Villon groaned. 'God knows what you two have done! I must meet the fellow and find out.'

'François,' said Montigny, 'I swear I didn't drink!'

'Why did you bring me into it?' said Master Villon, bitterly. 'I told you the college was the last! I want a clear path and peace of mind.'

'Do you remember how tender he was,' said Guy, 'when he first met Catherine? Who is it now? What new pair of legs ...?'

Master Villon slapped his face.

'Don't fight—not here,' said Montigny, catching Guy's wrist.

'I'll slit his long nose!'

'There's time and place for all things,' said Montigny. 'Haven't I warned you, never get off the subject? We're talking about Angers.'

Master Villon put up his knife. 'Bring him to-morrow night—at the Mule. You've gone too far to let him slip.'

'Evening?'

'After dark.'

'And you'll visit your uncle?' said Guy, still feeling out his cheek.

But Master Villon was around the corner, already at the cloister door, with a fresh twist to his thoughts. There, by the kerb, the provost's coach was waiting.

He tiptoed through the refectory. The main door of the chaplain's study opened from the hall, and would be shut, but there was a short-cut to meals which his godfather liked to leave open, for air, and to be sure what Édouard the cook was up to. Master Villon leaned against the refectory wall and listened.

'That is all I can tell you about him, my lady,' said the chaplain. 'Three times he has been in the hands of the law, and what else is in the record, God and the provost know better than I, but I doubt if he would rob a church. At heart he is good, and I pin my hope on the way he is disgusted with himself, from time to time.'

'He hasn't a bad face,' said Louise. 'I should have thought he came of a better family. May I ask one thing more? Is he—of course most students are—is he...'

The chaplain knew what was coming next. So did Master Villon.

'My lady, there were moments when I thought women would be his weakness, but there too I have hopes. He says he met a girl somewhere, heaven knows where, who put into him the desire of virtue. If the inspiration persists, God reward and protect her!'

Louise laughed, and the pleasant sound counteracted Master Villon's impulse to wring his godfather's neck. The old man, he saw, had identified the visitor and was exploring on his own account.

'Well, I won't keep you longer. Thank you again, father.'

'My lady, your concern for my godson has my gratitude, but I don't understand it. Why did you come?'

She laughed again. 'In your great city I'm bored. I have nothing to do. At home I give part of my time to the sick and the afflicted.'

'It's a proper charity,' said the chaplain, 'and I could tell

you were well brought up. Did you consider me afflicted?'

'Not you, father, but in the provost's house there is much talk of your godson, little of it flattering. Only the provost's wife says a kind word, and even she insists he used to be better than he is now, and she worries that he should be in Paris at all.'

'Don't I worry too, my lady!'

'The provost,' she continued, 'has a wonderful prejudice against him, and my father, though usually humane, wants to hang him with his own hands. Naturally, my interest was aroused.'

'Naturally,' said the chaplain.

'In our village we have no great saints or sinners. Why is it one always admires extremes?'

'You'll be disappointed,' said the chaplain. 'He was a mediocre sinner, and he promises to reform, which God grant, but he'll never be more than a half-way saint.'

'He ought to leave Paris quickly,' said Louise. 'Had I means of getting that warning to him, perhaps I wouldn't have interrupted your studies.'

'Your word, my lady, when I pass it on, may have force with him.'

There was a pause, as though she knew it was time to go.

'Father, I wish I understood him better!'

'Ah, my lady! Master Villon could imagine the lift of despairing hands.'

'Father—if I should come again—perhaps with the provost's wife—will you forget I was here to-day?'

'No, my daughter—I will not forget.'

She was struck dumb by the change, from courtly host to priestly counsellor.

'Daughter—I fear you are in love with him.'

Before Master Villon could stop her, she had said the quiet words.

'I am.'

She turned white when he stepped through the door.

'I save my father an inevitable embarrassment,' said he. 'His duty compels him now to say I'm not worth loving.'

My lady, I say it for him. Keep my heart, but never throw yours away.'

The chaplain was standing before his desk, in his black cassock, with a cross hanging under his throat. The girl was facing him, in a long blue gown, buttoned high, with a feather in her hat. They both turned, startled, and whether his godfather disapproved of the sudden entry, Master Villon didn't notice, having her brown eyes to look into.

'Have you visited the city yet, my lady—the attractive spots I recalled to your father when we talked at Corbeil?'

'My son,' said the chaplain, 'if there ever was a moment when light talk was out of tune . . .'

'I'm thinking of the cemetery,' said Master Villon, 'which in that cheerful hour I neglected to describe.'

'Bless me!' said the chaplain. 'The cemetery is an unlikely subject for dinner!'

'There are four gates to it,' said Master Villon, 'and between each two a high wall, and along the north wall an arcade, coloured with fading pictures. I've walked there by the hour, getting the sense of them—thirty, my lady, from a pope and a bishop down to a butcher and a baker, and with each the skull of death is dancing, the skeleton and the scythe.'

'I told you, my lady—he has reformed.'

'I fear I haven't,' said Master Villon, 'but if my lady wishes to understand me, my portrait is written there.'

She kept her eyes on him, but said nothing.

'Here's one person I'll tell the truth to, father. You did kindly for me, but I'll draw the picture straight. My mother had a taste for life, but only one gulp of it came her way. The man she loved took one look, and ran away from himself. What neither finished, has pushed me on.'

'Honour your parents,' said the chaplain awkwardly.

'If my lady cares to know it,' said Master Villon, 'I'm a bastard. Benevolence tried to cloister me here, but I flourished in the streets. The taverns and the girls, with a thief or two for friend, and most of the time the rope dangling. When Gabriel pipes and they heat the fire for me, I'll admit I liked it all.'

The chaplain crossed himself, and his lips moved.

'Tell your father and the provost,' Master Villon continued, 'they have me right.'

Because their eyes met, he added ' . . . so far as they know me.'

'I suppose,' said Louise, 'you still look at those pictures in the cemetery?'

Their eyes met again.

'It was my thought,' said he, 'to-morrow afternoon, before I leave Paris, to study them once more.'

She held out her hand for the chaplain to kiss, ignoring Master Villon entirely.

'I'll take you to your coach, my lady.'

Left alone, Master Villon stepped back into the refectory, to recover his hat, and started for his attic room. The chaplain, returning, caught up with him at the foot of the stairs.

'My son—she thought she loved you!'

'So I heard,' said Master Villon.

'God be praised, you've cured her, once for all!'

Master Villon put his foot on the first tread. 'My mother says you are a good man.'

'Ah—you have seen her?'

'But in my opinion, it's a pity your profession keeps you from any knowledge of womankind.'

*Lovers who lonely toss and roll,
 The verse I leave will bring on sleep.
 And here's a consecrated bowl—
 Gather your tears up, when you weep!
 To buy you bedside flowers, a spray
 Of something green, I'll leave a penny,
 If but a prayer or two you'll say
 For me, as sick a fool as any.*

He Thinks His Luck Has Turned

WHEN MASTER VILLON WENT UPSTAIRS TO HIS ATTIC room, his spirits were, to say the least, exalted. Since Louise had paid that visit to the cloisters, and since she had arranged with him, right under his godfather's nose, a tryst in the cemetery to-morrow afternoon, then for practical purposes she had tossed her hat over the windmill, and fate for once had decided to be sweet.

Master Villon had ideas. In the first place, he would write a poem, beginning at once. Then he would get to bed early and sleep long, to prepare for a great day. In the morning he would cheer his godfather by a promise to leave town forthwith, and if he handled the news right, his grateful parent would probably bestow another bag of gold. If and when the money was in hand, he would call on Michel the tailor and settle that long overdue bill for cleaning the mud out of his clothes. He did wonder what had become of Lady Marguerite, who had had him thrown in the river, but he put the question away, as belonging to his obsolete past. Then he would visit Galerne the barber and get himself shaved. After that the cemetery—and Louise.

There would be a kiss or two, in the shadows of the arcade. Then, to put their happiness on a permanent basis, he would persuade her to elope. Contemplating this avalanche of virtue and bliss, he felt a poem coming.

The pen was dry and shapeless, for want of use. He whittled a new point. Now then!

Eight lines in a rush! He tilted his chair back, and read them over, out loud. Too much in his old style, tragic and defeated. Would he scratch them out or mend them? There, that was right! Or perhaps it wasn't. A little too sugary. Lovers' yearnings, and all that. Master Villon wanted to laugh.

How would it go now? Bah, worse than ever! Entirely too witty. She'd never believe he was serious. Perhaps it would sound better in the morning.

It didn't, as a matter of fact; by daylight it seemed scandalously brisk. But no criticism is worth much if you're hungry. Master Villon pulled on his breeches, ran his fingers through what hair remained on the sides of his head, and went down to the refectory table. The cook heard him, and looked in from the kitchen.

'You!' said he.

'Me,' said Master Villon, sliding along the bench.

'Breakfast at this hour!'

'Call the meal what name you will, Édouard,' said Master Villon. 'But put something between my front and my back. They're so empty, they touch.'

His godfather came out of the study.

'Good morning to you,' said Master Villon without rising.

His godfather came around to the bench on the other side of the table. 'Fetch him some of the cold porridge, Édouard.'

'A little bread and cheese,' added Master Villon pleasantly, as though suggestions had been invited. 'And if there's a mug of ale...'

'Porridge, Édouard,' said the chaplain.

The cook reached into the kitchen for the dish and shot out again with the spoon sticking up in the lard-like mass.

'Édouard,' said the chaplain, 'you may return to your work.'

Édouard flopped his slippers back to the stove.

'He's a character,' said Master Villon, aggressively amiable. 'I always marvel that he can get his broad buttocks through that meagre door. He used to think of holy orders, didn't he, before you found out he could cook? How heaven leads us by a talent!'

'We missed you at supper,' said his godfather sternly.

'I was in my room.'

'For how long?' said the chaplain.

'Father, I was busy with my thoughts. I wrote a poem. I gave the evening to it.'

'As I have noticed before,' said the chaplain, 'you are the devil's masterpiece in liars.'

'But I can show you the verses!'

'Stay where you are,' said his parent. 'How would I know how long ago you composed them? They're about her, I suppose.'

Master Villon braced himself, to get the talk round to the path he had planned.

'If you knew,' said he, 'what a change she has wrought...'

'You are what you always were,' said his godfather, 'a bad man and proud of it, even merry.'

'My present cheerfulness,' said the poet, 'rises from what I confess is an unaccustomed practice of virtue. If you knew the human heart, you might believe me. Yesterday I said good-bye to Catherine. She's gone from my life. I also called on my mother, as a son should, and was rewarded for the visit.'

'What did she say?' asked the chaplain, a bit nervous.

'In your hearing,' Master Villon continued, 'I told Louise the truth about myself. Also, to keep the record perfect, I declined an invitation to rob your brother in Angers.'

'I knew it!' said the chaplain. 'God grant me patience! You are hobnobbing with the thieves again!'

'Warn my uncle to put his gold away,' said Master Villon, 'and no harm will be done. They have their net spread—but I've said good-bye to them too.'

'Angers!' groaned the chaplain. 'That quiet town! Are we safe nowhere?'

'Also,' said the poet, 'I leave Paris to-day. For ever.'

They looked at each other across the table. It seemed to Master Villon that his father was trying to decide whether it was true, and if so, whether an expression of melancholy would not be appropriate.

'I still have about half the bag of gold you gave me.'

'Keep it,' said the chaplain, with an expansive wave of the hand.

'I shall need more,' said Master Villon.

His father turned a thick purple.

'It is for the last time,' said Master Villon.

The chaplain kicked the bench over, getting up. 'Reformed, have you? Pig! Goat! Hell-spawn!'

'Don't go into my ancestry,' said Master Villon, smiling across at him. 'And don't give the money unless you think best. But I must get it somewhere, and to whom else should I turn? I'd rather take it from you than from my uncle in Angers.'

From the cast of the chaplain's face you wouldn't have guessed he was a man of God.

'When do you want it?'

'Now.'

'And you'll go at once?'

He disappeared into the study and came back with a well-rounded bag, which he flung on the table.

'I'll open the door for you myself,' said he.

Master Villon untied the bag, to be sure, then grabbed it by the neck and started for the stairs.

'Where are you going now?' said his father.

'I'll be with you in a twinkling,' said Master Villon. 'You wouldn't have me leave the poem behind, would you?'

In his attic room he put his hat on, and divided the coins equally between the two bags, to balance his pockets. The poem was lying on his desk. Before he could pick it up he heard a whistle in the street, and stretched his neck from the window.

Catherine was standing in the opposite gutter, with a shawl over her head.

'Come down,' she called.

'Good-bye!' he called back.

'Only a moment, François! It's about Noah!'

'Would I come down for him?'

'It's about you, François. You'll be glad to hear it.'

Why reject good tidings, from whatever source? Not when it's your lucky day. Master Villon slid lightly down the old vine.

Catherine laughed. 'Is *that* the way you get out?'

'Out or in,' said he, careless because he would never need that secret ladder again.

'François, I've quarrelled with Noah. I'm through with him.'

'No business of mine,' said he. 'What were you going to tell me?'

'Just that.'

He shrugged his shoulders, and made off towards the street of the Harp.

'François!' she called.

He kept on, with his hands in his pockets, one on each bag.

'You'll be sorry!'

He hurried around the corner to the left. She was calling so loud, his godfather at the front-door might hear her. He smiled at the thought of those two meeting.

Michel the tailor was in his shop, still bent and crippled from the racking he had suffered, months ago. At sight of Master Villon he turned pale—from anger, as the visitor had reason to guess.

'Good morning, Michel. How are the joints?'

'Satan, begone!' said the tailor fervently.

'I owe you money,' said Master Villon, laying a piece on the counter.

The tailor threw it out the open door.

'Pick it up when I'm gone,' said Master Villon. 'The gold isn't false this time. Ask my godfather. I had it from him.'

'You've ruined my health!' cried Michel. 'They all but boiled me alive for the other coin!'

'Wasn't I on the gallows beside you, with the rope fitted?' said Master Villon. 'And neither of us at fault.'

'God will catch up with you! May I be there to see!'

Master Villon turned away. 'Don't leave it in the gutter too long. Some of the undeserving poor might get it.'

It increased his sense of virtue, not to pick it up himself. The face he took into the barber-shop, on Saint James street, was cheerful under a week's beard.

'Greetings, Colin Galerne! Smooth me off my cheeks, will you?'

Galerie was taking a nap, in the furthest corner. He woke slightly dazed. 'At once, at once—seat yourself!'

Then he recognized his customer. 'No, François Villon—it is impossible!'

'Won't the razor cut?'

'Have the kindness to leave my shop, François Villon!'

It was too late in life for the poet to be sensitive. 'I don't owe you anything, do I?'

'The provost warned me,' said the barber. 'If I shave you, I'm to let him know.'

'Shave me, then,' said Master Villon, drawing a chair near the window. 'You don't have to tell him at once?'

'On peril of my life.'

Master Villon took from the right-hand bag a fat gold piece.

'It's a parting gift,' said he. 'Never again will you put soap on this beard.'

'That's true,' said Colin Galerne, fingering the handsome coin. 'Especially if I tell the provost. You wouldn't offer me a bribe, would you?'

'It's to-morrow you shaved me,' said Master Villon, giving himself a day's start. He slid down in the chair, leaned his head back, and shut his eyes. The barber slipped the money into his own thin purse, and brought out the bowl.

When the chin was covered, he stropped the razor.

'There's a story going around,' said he, 'and many a time I've wished for a quiet moment with you, to get the truth of it. They say Lady Marguerite, over on the island, had you into her house for the night, and drowned you afterwards.'

'You can see for yourself,' said Master Villon, 'how drowned I am.'

'I was thinking of that,' said Galerne, lifting the nose to work on the lip. 'How about the other part?'

'It's the woman that has to be drowned,' said Master Villon. 'They stick like burrs.'

'Don't they, though!' said the barber, chuckling, to show he knew life. 'But these fine ladies, now . . .' He gave his attention to the neck.

'They keep proper on the outside,' he continued, cleaning the blade on a soiled towel, 'but at home, when the shutters are closed . . .' He smacked his lips, to indicate the unutterable.

'Do you know the Lady Marguerite?' he asked.

'By reputation,' said Master Villon.

'If we poor folk, now,' said the barber, 'behaved that way . . .'

'But we do, don't we?' said Master Villon. 'It's the one part we can share in a rich man's life.'

'You're speaking of men; I referred to the women,' said the barber. 'I think the women should obey the ten commandments, one in particular. The Lady Marguerite, for example. Do you know what they say?'

Master Villon sat up in the chair and ran his hand over the fresh cheek. 'Very smooth this time, Colin Galerne.'

'I could do it better,' said the barber, folding up his napkins, 'if you'd let me do it more often. Who shaved you last?'

Master Villon put his hat on, not wishing to report on his travels.

'Some of the rich women are good,' said he.

'I won't say it never happens,' said Galerne, resting on the back of the chair and crossing one leg in front of the other.

Master Villon looked back at him from the door. 'It's to-morrow I had this shave, you remember.'

From noon on, he was waiting in the cemetery. It suited his impatience to be there early, since they had fixed no certain hour. Up and down the arcade he paced, busy with his dreams. They would go to Poitou, a pleasant district where perhaps they could stretch out the bag of gold for a year or so, and when the neighbours saw how admirable a citizen he was, frugal but paying his debts, they would doubtless help him to employment. No one need starve who can write. He could compose an occasional letter for them, or he could work for a notary—there are always notaries—or perhaps the village priest could use a lay-assistant, or there might be a rich youth to instruct—or at worst, if he wrote more poems, his old rescuer, the Duke of Orleans, might . . .

He gave hardly a glance at the dance of death on the walls. A grave-digger at the other end of the cemetery was tossing dirt out of a hole. Master Villon's calculations of ways and means floated on the surface of his thought.

Underneath was his yearning for Louise, the luxurious pain of complete love, not for lips and arms only, but for mind and soul. If they two could always be together! If she were there to listen to, and talk to, and look at! If he could feel her nearness in the house!

It was four o'clock or later when she came, wearing a man's hat and a man's long cloak wrapped round her. The grave-digger had gone home. Seeing her there at last, on the stones of the arcade, Master Villon was lifted to a peak of bliss. He and she alone!

'I had begun to fear...'

'You knew I would come,' she said, unbuttoning the collar of her coat. 'Must we talk standing up?'

They sat on a convenient tomb.

'Let me ask you one thing,' said she, with her frank eyes. 'There's little time. You love me—I love you. We'll skip what we know. You have loved other women before.'

'Not loved,' he put in.

'Are you tangled with the last one, whoever she is? Don't be annoyed—it would be only natural, wouldn't it?'

'There is no one,' said Master Villon. 'I am free.'

'Does she think so?' asked Louise. 'The provost's wife says you'll be dogged by your adventures. I shouldn't like to begin a tug-of-war with some other girl.'

'It wouldn't appeal to me either,' said Master Villon, 'since I'd be what you'd tug at. I promise my undistracted devotion, with peace thrown in.'

'I wish I understood you better,' said she. 'At one moment you seem very direct, but again I ask if you are laughing at me. Aren't you too fond of adventure and new experiments?'

'I should like a kiss.' He took it before she could answer, and it seemed what she had been waiting for.

'Now if we hurry,' said he, 'we can pass the city gate and be well on the road south before dark.'

'Oh, are you running away?'

'I am carrying you off, my darling!'

'You think you can smuggle me through the gate?'

'I know I can!'

'And how shall we live, afterwards?'

'I have the gold in my pockets,' said he. 'Honest gold, bestowed by my godfather,' he added, meeting her glance.

'I have some too,' said she, 'but it's in my room at the provost's.'

'Let it stay there,' said he. 'Life comes first.'

'Yet we could use the money,' said she, 'and if I'm running away with you, I'd better take a few clothes.'

'Darling—there isn't time!'

She kissed him. 'You haven't much patience, have you! Here I am, like a bird you whistled to, throwing my life in with yours, and you grudge me an hour to gather up a handkerchief and a change for the journey!'

'The gates will be closed,' said he. 'We'll buy more as we go.'

She laughed. 'What a fortune we have! No, François, we'll go to-morrow—as early as you wish. I'll come to you—where shall we say? Oh, I know! I'll call on your nice godfather again, and you'll happen along and we'll worry once more about your sins, and I'll take my last farewell of you both, and then you'll slip out and find me here!'

'I've done some foolish things,' said Master Villon, 'but that would be the worst, to lose an hour of you!'

The girl reached up her lips again. 'I'm glad you're so headlong, but, you know, I'll be doing pretty well even by my plan. I didn't expect to be blown over the wall, like a leaf in the wind. I thought we were to meet, and give a word to each other, and of course I was hoping that some day...'

'Now!'

She laid her head on his shoulder and they clung together for a moment in the dusk, with his arms around her. He was sure she would relent, if they stood there long enough.

'I'm not ready to start now,' she said at last, with a bit of a sigh, as he thought. 'But to-morrow I shall be. I'll come to the cloisters.'

His heart sank.

'Does a moment like this come twice?'

She put her hand up to pat his cheek. 'And you're supposed to know about life! If the moments wouldn't be all like this, do you think I'd risk it?'

'Perhaps—you won't!'

'Silly! I promise! To-morrow!'

When he followed her towards the street, she asked him to stay behind, and he knew her caution was wise. He waited in the darkness of the arcade, between the graves and the pictures, until she was far on her way.

Then moving slowly back to Saint Benoît's, he tried to dull the pang by imagining subtle reasons for her coyness. Not the gold or the clothes, certainly, but a fine reluctance, a sensitive woman's fear that her generosity should seem cheap. The assertion of her right to come to him properly prepared, marked her a great lady. Catherine or Margot wouldn't have thought of it.

What could he say now to his godfather? Best to climb up the vine again, and hide in the room till morning. A long wait, when you are in no mood for verse-making. He remembered the Mule, where Montigny and Guy would be entertaining Peter Merchant. And he had intended to have no more traffic with them!

The Mule was a simpler tavern than the Pine Cone, but it was off the pavement, not down in the cellar, and since the cloisters had an eye on it, decorum was its foible. You talked in low tones, and you were not supposed to sing. If you felt yourself getting drunk, you went home, or if you overstayed your prudence, the tavern-keeper threw you out, as a sacrifice to the higher life.

There at a small table in the corner sat Montigny and Guy, with a moon-faced creature who looked like a priest. He wore country clothes, leather leggings and breeches and a woollen shirt, but to Master Villon's eye he could have found his way through a Latin prayer.

'Here's our poet,' said Guy. 'Peter Merchant, you are in the presence of a unique talent.'

Peter Merchant spread himself in a good-natured smile, but for a second his eyes were like gimlets.

'What will you eat?' said Montigny. 'There's a rabbit stew.'

'Food is food,' said Master Villon.

'Have some wine,' said Montigny, beckoning for another mug.

'We were just discussing you,' said Guy, swallowing half a pint and wiping his lips on his sleeve. 'Peter Merchant knows an uncle of yours in Angers.'

'He can't,' said Master Villon. 'I have no uncle.'

'Don't split hairs!' said Guy. 'Your godfather's brother.'

'My godfather has no brother.'

Guy helped himself to the wine-pitcher, to cool his temper.

'Assuming that you're telling the truth, there's still a priest in Angers, and Peter Merchant thinks you should visit him.'

'Why?' asked Master Villon, looking straight at the man.

'It wasn't my idea,' said Peter Merchant, in an unctuous voice. Master Villon was sure he belonged to the church.

'Well, whoever thought of it,' said Guy, reddening.

'If it's *your* plan,' said Master Villon, 'it's a bad one.'

Montigny hastened to sweeten the tone. 'François, this person in Angers has a small fortune, and too much money undermines the soul. We were contemplating an errand of mercy, a thorough-going rescue, and Peter Merchant thinks that you, of all the clever lads he has heard of . . .'

'I don't steal, if that's what you want!'

Guy stood up. 'You don't steal, don't you?' The noise turned several heads their way, and the tavern-keeper hurried over with the food.

'Sit down, Guy,' said Montigny. 'You're drunk again.'

Guy flopped back to his bench, and poured more wine, to vindicate his sobriety.

'It's all in confidence,' said Peter Merchant, when the tavern-keeper had retired and the other clients had forgotten them. 'If this fellow in Angers doesn't interest you, then he doesn't.'

Master Villon took his own pace, and finished his stew. After one sip, for manners, he left the wine alone.

'It's a lean season,' said Montigny, 'and we should all look to the future.'

Guy passed from indignation to philosophy, the wine performing miracles. His tongue sounded too large for his mouth.

'If he really has the gold—thash the question. No other question's of the least importances. Supposing, now, he goes all the way to Angers—all the way to Angers—all the way to—to . . .'

'To Angers,' said Montigny. 'Shut up, for God's sake!'

'And having arrived at—at—whatever the place is,' continued Guy, 'supposing the priest is poor, as he should be? He took a vow, didn't he? I ask you—did he—or didn't he—take a vow? But when you look at it in the teeth, whash a vow, anyway? Whash—is it?'

He became fascinated by a drop of wine on the table, which he smacked, thinking it a fly. Discovering his error, he traced geometrical designs with his finger.

'Peter Merchant,' said Master Villon, 'I believe you know who I am and what I've done.'

The man smiled courteously. 'By hearsay. A brilliant career!'

'I've been a thief,' said Master Villon, 'and the law has taken toll of me. But I'm clear now, and I won't try it again. Plan what you like, but count me out!'

'I plan nothing,' said Peter Merchant.

'What's your business in the city?'

'I sell wine,' said Peter Merchant. 'In the vineyards we grow somewhat dull, from year to year. I envy the excitements of your world, your gallant pranks . . .'

'Our stealing?'

'Peccadilloes!' said the man, with a wave of his wrist. 'The pranks of youth!'

'Thash what I say,' murmured Guy. 'A slender girl and a fat purse! God's gift to the young! Montigny—I say—Montigny . . .'

'Well,' said Montigny, 'what is it now?'

Guy was smirking at him, heavy-eyed. 'You remember the time—yes, you do, don't pretend—that time . . .'

Montigny excused him to Peter Merchant. 'He's had no food since yesterday.'

Guy drew himself up. 'You think I'm drunk! I know you do. I'm not! I ask you now—I ask you—do you remember—the College of Navarre?'

In the silence Peter Merchant rubbed his plate with a piece of bread. Montigny, white-faced, sat with his eyes riveted on the fool across the table. Master Villon called for his reckoning and paid.

'A pleasant evening to you all,' he said, and stepped out into the night.

He could hear the voice of the judge, pronouncing doom. The ladder and the rope had come alive again. If only Louise had fled when he asked her!

Nothing for it now but to climb the cloister wall and hide in his attic bed. Not the safest place, if Peter Merchant spread the news quickly, but that was where she would come in the morning. Once more the old vine served him.

In his dark room he had the conviction that someone was near. He kept his knife in his hand. If anyone should wind fingers around his throat—but it was the familiar nervousness of guilt—no reason for going to pieces now.

He found the bed with his hand, and sank on it. Or on what was in it.

'You needn't squeeze the breath out of me,' said Catherine, 'and you needn't get huffy. I know you wish it was someone else.'

*Love if you will, lead her about
 Through glade or garden, bower or bed;
 Lucky if you come home without
 An aching heart or a broken head.
 Love will steal away your mind;
 Solomon kissed all womankind;
 Samson, kissing one, went blind;
 Happy is he who leaves them alone!*

*Orpheus, who went underneath
 With his bagpipe and his flute,
 Missed by an inch or so the teeth
 Of Cerberus, that four-headed brute.
 Narcissus, beautiful but silly,
 Smitten by a heartless filly,
 Drowned himself in pond and lily.
 Happy is he who leaves them alone!*

*Sardanapalus, who with ease
 Stamped the Cretans under heel,
 Dressed himself in a lace chemise
 And sat him down at a spinning-wheel.
 King David kept, while he was wise,
 Only God before his eyes,
 Till Bathsheba washed her shapely thighs.
 Happy is he who leaves them alone!*

*Must you court the danger still,
 Young man, now the worst is known?
 Love her, then, if that's your will!
 But happy is he who leaves them alone!*

He Has No Luck At All

WHEN MASTER VILLON PUT ON HIS HAT, FLUNG OPEN the door of the Mule, and went into the night, Montigny was left at the table in the corner, with Peter Merchant pretending interest in the gravy on his plate, and Guy across the board, drowsy with drink and vaguely regretting his dangerous words.

Peter Merchant, whose manners were above the average, broke the awkward silence.

'A very intelligent fellow, that.'

'You mean the one who is gone, or the one who is drunk?'

Guy raised his head from his arms on the table, to protest, then sank off again.

'Has he really reformed?' said Peter Merchant. 'The College of Navarre, now . . .'

'Guy shouldn't have mentioned it,' said Montigny hastily. 'Not before him.'

Peter Merchant liked gossip. 'Was Villon the thief?'

'Who else?'

'That's what I asked myself. He's clever, but could he break into the strong-box alone?'

'Couldn't he! He's the best of us, when his moods aren't on him.'

Peter Merchant gave another sharp look, but Montigny was watching Guy.

'When he wakes he'll be noisy. I'll carry him home now.'

'I'll help,' said Peter Merchant, like the kind man he was.

'It's not necessary,' said Montigny, with pronounced firmness. 'I've a system for transporting him.'

'Ah—a system?'

'Good night!' said Montigny.

'At least you'll permit me to care for the bill,' said Peter Merchant. 'Where were we to meet, to-morrow morning?'

But Montigny had his arm under Guy's shoulder, and was already lifting him out of the chair, doorward. Peter

Merchant stayed behind, for a while at least, to argue with the tavern-keeper.

So many meetings, that next morning! Ambroise, the provost's wife, met Louise coming down the stairs, in a plain grey gown and a hat without a feather, and a small bundle under her arm.

'Again?' said she. 'Your father won't forgive me!'

'Oh, Ambroise, I never was so happy!'

'There's a shining in your face,' said the woman, 'which I don't like, and you're dressed like a market-wench.'

'One more ride,' said the girl, 'and I'll know the town.'

'Not to the cloisters again!'

'Dear me, no! Nothing so stuffy!'

'Louise,' said the provost's wife, 'I've told the men to follow if you leave the coach.'

The girl laughed. 'I told the coachman not to harness his horses. I'm walking.' They smiled at each other.

'Did you plan it by yourself?' asked the provost's wife, 'or did he help?'

'How silly, Ambroise! I'm just walking along the river—for an hour!'

'I've done it too,' said the provost's wife, 'when I was your age. I didn't think he'd break my heart, either.'

'Ambroise, I'm walking by the river—alone.'

'The river has much to answer for,' said the woman. 'I don't believe you, my dear.'

Louise laughed again. 'If he were in my place, he'd tell the truth.'

'You think so?'

'I'm going to the cloisters. I hope to see him.'

'Of course,' said the provost's wife. 'What have you in that bundle?'

'Oh—clothes for the poor.'

'The way *he* would tell the truth! Heaven help you, child!'

'Ambroise—let me go!'

The provost's wife thought hard. 'Shall I tell the truth too? If I can prevent it, he'll never get his hands on you, but this time I think I'll let you—yes, I'll let you go!'

With the bundle under her arm Louise walked soberly along the river-bank to the city bridge, and across the island, past the Pine Cone, to the second bridge and the street of Saint James, sorry to keep him waiting so long, and thinking how his face would light when she came.

Just then, could she have known it, his face was dark with anger. From daybreak on he had tried to put Catherine out of his attic room.

'Go down the way you came up, and be quick, before the streets are full.'

'François, you know I couldn't,' she protested, stretching lazily on his narrow bed. 'The vine might break, and there's nothing to hold on to.'

'If I had a place to hide the corpse,' said he, 'I'd kill you!'

'What a change from last night!' said she. 'There were moments, weren't there!'

'No one,' said he, 'will ever hate you more faithfully than I. The sun is up—go home!'

'You didn't love me—not even a little?'

'What's done is done,' said he, 'but I was wishing you were in hell.'

'I love *you*, François.'

'Oh, no, you don't!'

'Well,' said she, 'I probably do not. It just seemed a decent way to say good-bye.'

'All right, you've said it—will you go?'

She turned her head from side to side on the mattress, smiling up at him.

'You refuse to leave?'

'My dear, I refuse to give you up. She can't have you.'

Master Villon was thinking that Louise might be coming along, any minute. He must dispose of Catherine, at whatever price.

'You can choose now,' said he, 'whether we're to go our ways with civil feelings or whether we're to end in a fight.'

'I expect a fight,' said Catherine. 'I don't intend to let you go.'

'I'm leaving the city,' said he.

'I'm staying,' said she.

For a moment he stretched his shoulders through the little window, as though sunlight brought ideas. Then he came again to the bed and looked down on her.

'Could you use a handful of gold?'

She sat up. 'François! You charming man!'

He drew the bag from the left pocket. If worse came to worst, he would empty the right as well.

'I'll go down now,' he explained, 'and occupy my godfather in excited conversation. That will be your chance. Follow the stairs. At the bottom you'll see where the door is. I'll leave it open.'

When he dropped the bag in her hands, she thrust it under the pillow and lay down again.

'Don't you always hate to get up?' she said. 'Why is every mattress soft in the morning?'

'Put on your clothes,' he urged. 'If my godfather is angry, our talk may not be long.'

At the foot of the stairs he heard in the study a voice which would have quickened his pulse if his conscience had been clean. He set the front-door ajar and stole into the refectory to listen.

Louise was in high spirits. 'But take it the other way,' she was saying. 'Even if he's bad for me, won't I be good for him? He shouldn't marry a girl who's worse than he is, should he? If I'm better, as you hope, why not give us your blessing?'

'My lady,' said the chaplain, 'let him marry no one at all! If she did get used to him, all at once she'd be a widow.'

'I count on you,' she persisted, 'to say a good word to my father. When he learns the news, he'll threaten and swear and whatever else is correct for fathers, but if we can keep him from harm at the beginning, he'll gradually soften.'

'My lady,' said the chaplain, 'were there danger of your marrying the boy, I'd alarm your father, instead of quieting his suspicions. François is a rascal. While he was here I stretched truth, to spare him. He has no thought of marrying you, though I'm sure he'd like a bit of your com-

pany, i—the way of sin. He left Paris yesterday, and if you see him again you'll find it more undignified the next time he leaves you.'

By the sound of her voice, Master Villon knew she was trying not to laugh. 'Father, he won't leave me. I won't let him.'

'But he's gone!'

'Why do you think so?'

The chaplain sounded discouraged. 'If he's still here, the provost's men will have him by noon. You might as well know all. He's plotting to rob a brother of mine, in Angers. He had the impudence to tell me in advance. Don't look shocked, my lady—if you marry him, this is what you must expect. At the tavern across the street he's been consorting with other thieves, but one they took for a fool turns out to be a spy. The law has its fingers stretched this morning for Montigny and Guy Tabarie and your precious husband.'

There was a silence, and the gravity with which Louise spoke at last touched Master Villon to a deeper shame than he had yet known.

'That he is in peril would make no difference to me—if he is honest.'

'Honest, my lady?'

'Father, I believe he is! Since we met, he has left off—whatever he used to do! I know he has!'

'Peter Merchant will furnish strong evidence against your amiable interpretation,' said the chaplain. 'No, my lady, François is lost. He's anchored to thieves and women, like a fly with one foot in the honey. I wouldn't say he might not wish, for your sake, to get free, but he can't. He never saw an ankle he didn't run after, and the stealing followed naturally. The one salvation for a soul in his predicament would be to step out of the world, confide himself to the church, and avoid temptation altogether, but the church would be wary of him now, with such a record.'

There was another pause. 'I don't want him to step out of the world,' said Louise, 'and he doesn't belong to the church. He belongs to me.'

'That other time you were here,' continued the chaplain,

'he listened behind yonder wall, and heard you say you loved him. Yet he has deserted you.'

'Oh, no,' said Louise, 'he hasn't deserted me. . . . Have you, François?'

Master Villon was coming through the refectory door. The sight may have been reassuring as to his faithfulness to his latest love, but from all other angles the chaplain found it disconcerting.

'What is this, now? You back again?'

'Not a moment too soon, either, with you be-sliming my character,' said Master Villon. 'I ought to hide inside the church, ought I, with cowards like yourself, afraid of their own shadow in sunlight? I deserted her, did I? You thought I was your child, to the letter?'

'François!' said Louise, catching the look on the chaplain's face.

'If you're ready with scandal this morning,' Master Villon went on, 'blow on your courage and tell her who I am!'

The chaplain put his hand to his brow.

'Don't speak to your godfather so bitterly,' said Louise. 'I know who you are, and what you've done, and what you won't do again. You and I know. Nothing else matters.'

'I'll explain about Peter Merchant,' said Master Villon. 'He's a snake.'

'On the contrary,' said the chaplain, 'he's an excellent man, in minor orders, hunting down some sacrilegious criminals.'

'Let him settle with God,' said Master Villon. 'He suggested that I rob my uncle in Angers. He wanted a case against me, that I might hang. I thumbed my nose at him and advised you to give my uncle warning. Why don't you tell the truth?'

'My word! What eloquence!' said a pleasant contralto voice.

The provost's wife, in her best hat and gown, came in from the hall, smiling broadly.

'Do you always leave your doors open? Louise, my dear, I thought I'd look after you to-day, for your father's sake

and perhaps your own. Go right on, François. Don't let me interrupt.'

'Madame d'Estouteville,' said the chaplain, 'I am honoured. Will you—François, bring a chair.'

'I can stand as well as anybody,' said Ambroise. 'Have you married them yet?'

'That's an idea!' said Louise. 'With you for witness!'

'Madame,' said the chaplain, 'please to understand my position. I should like my godson not to be hanged. I should like this young woman not to be harmed. Beyond these two modest desires, I'd have nothing to do with either of them.'

Master Villon was plotting how to slip from this welter of talk. Until Ambroise appeared, he had considered the problem fairly simple, even after his godfather's news of the spy, but the provost's wife, for reasons which he best could furnish, would stick like plaster.

'Ambroise,' said he, 'did you come in your coach?'

She looked surprised. 'Why not?'

'You will take Louise home with you, of course?'

'Most certainly!'

'Take me too.'

His audacity upset her, as he knew it would. For a second their eyes met, and for once she had only a fumbling answer.

'What good would that do you?'

'If you carry off Louise,' said he, 'I will join you in the coach, or if you refuse that courtesy, I'll run behind the wheels to your door. Since you challenged me, you must have expected a duel. A desperate one. I stake all. The jail will hold me till your husband comes. Then I'll call my godfather to witness that you were here this morning—as in other times you have been glad of my company.'

He paused, to let the idea ripen, and she saw all the edges in the threat. She was as little a coward as he.

'Are these the weapons you choose?'

'Madame d'Estouteville, you force them on me.'

Louise laid her hand on his arm. 'I have something to say. I will not go back in the coach. They can put me in jail with you.'

The chaplain leaned against the desk, for support. 'Madame, I am not a rich man, but I have still some property, much as this rascal has cost me. I will make any compromise with the law to avert the disaster which I foresee . . .'

'Money won't cure it,' said Master Villon. 'The right answer is, as usual, simple. You might marry us, here and now, but then Madame d'Estouteville would be embarrassed, not to speak of yourself. If she were generous she might drive us beyond the city gates and let us disappear into the world, but that would leave her to deal with Louise's father. Madame had better go home alone and forget that she came. Louise will then continue the walk which brought her here.'

'Imbecile!' said the chaplain, a bit too hastily. The provost's wife did not agree with him.

'Louise,' she said, 'I wished only to save you. Will you come with me?'

The girl shook her head. 'I'm sorry, Ambroise.'

'So be it,' said the provost's wife. She turned to Master Villon.

'They won't let her past the city gates.'

'I've provided for that,' said he.

'She'll finish her walk inside the walls,' said the provost's wife, 'and within the hour she'll be safe at home.'

'Safe indeed,' said Master Villon. 'I'll see to it.'

'Well,' said the provost's wife, 'I'm just filling out that general challenge you referred to. Do your worst—I'll do my best.'

They stood waiting, the four of them.

'Madame,' said Master Villon, 'shall I escort you to your coach?'

Ambroise smiled at the chaplain. 'Father, I'll accept that chair you offered.'

'Bring a chair, François!'

But François stayed where he was, and let his godfather drag in a bench from the refectory.

'Thank you, father,' said Ambroise cheerfully, settling herself for a long rest. 'Does your parish keep you busy

these days? My husband is one of your admirers. He says . . .'

Master Villon put his hat on. 'If Louise is to be safe at home within the hour, she ought to get on with her walk.'

'You are too bold with the young lady,' said the exasperated chaplain. 'You should speak of her as Made-moiselle de Grigny.'

'Should I?' said Master Villon, looking around for advice.

Ambroise smiled triumphantly at him. 'You should—even though you consider her your wife. Where the woman is better bred, she keeps her name.'

'I'll finish my walk now,' said Louise, 'but I've heard of that room in the attic where François spent his boyhood. Will you show it to me, father, before I go?'

'I doubt if it's tidy enough,' said Master Villon.

'As it is,' said Louise. 'I wouldn't expect it to be tidy. Will you, father?'

The chaplain had wasted no luxuries on Master Villon's upkeep. He tried to recall whether there was any furniture, besides the straw bed.

'My lady, it's just a student's room. If you cared to examine the more interesting portions of the cloisters . . .'

'The attic,' said Louise.

The chaplain reached into the pocket of his cassock and drew out three keys on a string. 'There's an unusual well in the corner of the kitchen, and you'd enjoy seeing the church. The carvings of the sacristy . . .'

'Where he grew up, and slept, and wrote his poems,' said the girl, following him out. The provost's wife and Master Villon faced each other, alone.

'Sentimental, perhaps,' said Ambroise, 'but she hopes to win him over.'

Master Villon, hat on head, stared down at her, with his hands in his pockets.

'Well?' said she, staring back.

'Why?' said he, after a pause.

'You know why. A woman doesn't give up a man she has loved.'

'But that's over!'

'Is it?'

'Ambroise, *you* don't love me!'

'You couldn't make her happy,' said the provost's wife, 'nor any other woman. It's a work of mercy to thwart you. You bring her nothing but poverty and a bad name. When you've picked the heart out of her, you'll go on to someone else.'

She smiled. 'You see—I still care for you.'

'But you married d'Estouteville!'

'You were very young.'

'He was rich,' said Master Villon. 'Because you never felt right about it, you turn my enemy now.'

'Not your enemy.'

Master Villon removed his hat and rubbed his brow. 'Perhaps it's too late. Had I kept to my studies when I was young, as you say, very young—had I given myself to—you needn't jeer—to a good life—I'd now have a home of my own and a feathered bed and whatever you taunt me for not having. But I looked up from my books, and saw you.'

She had no answer to that.

'The hungry scholar, you called me,' Master Villon went on, 'the bashful little starveling who didn't know what food he wanted. So you set me on my way, and wished me luck, and went off laughing.'

Her face was grave.

'Ambroise—for God's sake—help me now! Let me have Louise!'

She used his mother's words. 'You are a strange man!'

'Ambroise—she makes me wish to be what I was when I first saw you.'

The provost's wife shifted on the hard bench, and cleared her throat. 'If I did what you ask, if I helped you to marry her . . .'

'The blessings of heaven, Ambroise!'

'If I prove to you that I really didn't forget, that I still care . . .'

The voice of the chaplain sounded from the attic, loud and angry.

'What's happened now?' said the provost's wife.

Master Villon went up the stairs two steps at a time.

Louise and his godfather were at the door of his room, looking in.

When he joined them, he saw Catherine spread out lazily on the bed. Nothing, apparently, had ever given her so much pleasure.

'How you keep me waiting, François,' said she. 'I thought you were gone for good!'

Master Villon turned to Louise, but could not meet the pain in her glance. She was ashen-grey. Since nothing worse could happen to him, he covered his despair with a light manner, as on that day when the tailor and he were almost boiled and hanged.

'You wished to see my past,' said he, 'and Catherine likes public attention. Now everybody can be happy.'

'My lady,' said the chaplain, surprisingly calm, 'this will need explaining to the bishop. It's not supposed to happen in the cloisters. But it's the tender will of God, I do believe, to save you from the wiles of a rogue.'

'Still on that subject?' said the provost's wife, coming up the stairs. 'What's he been doing now?'

'Just cast your eye yonder,' said the chaplain, making a place for her on the crowded threshold.

Ambroise looked in, and began to laugh. 'My dear François! You are too ambitious! Really you are!'

Catherine followed their words, from face to face.

'Put the blanket over her,' said the chaplain. Without waiting for assistance she covered herself.

The chaplain was puzzled, what to do next. His thoughts struck off at an angle. 'Except for these four walls, the house won't need consecrating over again.'

'Louise can put a tablet above the bed,' said Master Villon, impudent because he was wretched, 'a word or two of Latin thanks, having escaped shipwreck.'

'My lady, he brings this disgrace on me, any day of the year,' said the chaplain, 'but I hoped to hide it from you.'

'Then you knew she was here?' asked Louise.

'I did not!'

'You never can tell,' said Master Villon bitterly, 'when what he calls the tender will of God may show itself!'

'Louise,' said the provost's wife, 'will you come home with me?'

The girl pushed past them all, into the room, with a look which made Catherine shrink down on the pillow.

'He told me about you.'

'I know he did.'

'He said it was—that you were . . .'

'Did he say he was through with me?' asked Catherine.

'He always says that. I wish I'd had your luck—to see for myself. He invited me here last night, but it's a dirty trick now, showing me to you all.'

Master Villon started to speak, but bit his lip instead.

'It's the way of his kind,' said Catherine, thinking to rub the poison in. 'I was something to fill time with, till he could trip up a lady like you. Then did he cast me off? The gutter for me!'

'I repeat your own words,' said Louise. 'Did he cast you off?'

From under the blanket Catherine thrust a white arm and shoulder. 'What do you think?'

'I know you are shameless!' cried the other, in sudden passion. 'I think you are a liar! Long ago he ceased to care for you! You are angry because he loves me!'

'Not angry,' said Catherine. 'I always keep my temper.'

'Of course you do!' cried Louise, losing the last shred of control. 'You go after what you want, as cool as a toad! You crept in here to make trouble! He didn't invite you! He wasn't here last night!'

'That's what he says!'

Master Villon, moved by an impulse deeper than shame, found his voice. 'Louise, I was here.'

She swayed, as though she would faint. Ambroise stepped forward and put an arm around her. 'Poor child—come!'

But Catherine sat up, holding the blanket to her neck.

'You think I want him? You think I'm jealous? Go home and wash your mind! I haven't kissed his ugly jaw for years, and then I knew no better! Look at him, the pig-face! He used to whine on my doorstep, till Noah Jolis got the boys together and beat him. He cast me off? He's

a hand-me-down! Every woman in the quarter was sick of him before you cut your second teeth. I was just resting here, in case you happened along, so I could do the handsome thing and make you a present of what I was through with!'

Her voice rose to the scream favoured by market-women in debate.

'This,' said Ambroise, 'is quite enough.'

When she led Louise from the room, the girl walked in a daze. The chaplain followed to the stairs.

'My lady, I'll never again hold my head up! Bad though he is, I didn't expect . . .'

'Don't come down,' said the provost's wife. 'You're needed in that room.'

But Louise slipped from her arm and went back, to where Master Villon leaned against the door-jamb, weary and dragged.

'You break my heart!' she said. 'I hate you!'

'That's the least you should do,' said he.

'You will see me no more,' said she, a bit less violent. 'It was a mistake.'

He bowed. 'For you—not for me!'

Her face changed, as though she might cry, and he would have added a word, had she not run down the stairs after Ambroise. He could hear the closing of the great portal, and the grinding of the coach-wheels. He waited till his godfather came up again.

Catherine was dressing hurriedly, still warmed with the zest of battle.

'Well, my poet, have I taught you something? Turn me off, will you?'

Master Villon strode past her and looked out, to be sure of a clear street.

'Father,' said he, 'I leave her in your hands. She has gold of yours on her person.'

With that he went through the window-frame and down the side of the house, with the aid of the old vine.

*Smooth forehead crowned with golden hair,
 Long eyelash and high-arching brow,
 Sweet roguish glances that could snare
 Even the wise—where are they now?
 Where are the proud nose, straight and thin,
 The small ears close to the shapely head,
 The clear white cheeks, the dimpled chin,
 The full lips glowing ruby-red,
 The regal shoulders, gently shaped,
 Long arms, smooth hands, and delicate fingers,
 Firm breasts, seductive hips and flanks,
 Where yearning lives, and dies, and lingers,
 The tourney-field where champions meet
 And risk a lance to gain the prize,
 The hidden garden of delight,
 Secure upon the jealous thighs?
 See now, the forehead wrinkled up,
 Eyebrows dropped out, eyes shot and dull,
 Which once were filled with smiling light,
 And all men called them beautiful!
 The nose a beak, the ears two flaps
 Of idle flesh, deaf as a stone,
 The cheeks turned yellow, parchment-lined,
 And the chin withered to the bone.
 Alas, the beauty of humankind!*

He Desires a Quiet Life

MASTER FRANÇOIS VILLON, POET BY NATURE, SINNER BY impulse and fugitive by necessity, lifted his eyes from the dusty road, midway through the autumn afternoon, and saw the spires of Chartres rising from the island-hill in the plain. If there was one thing he needed more than another, even more than food, it was an hour of meditation. The provost's men would never look for him in church.

Two weeks out of Paris, plodding the miles, knowing he had lost Louise, because of Catherine, and might never go back, because of Louise's father and the provost. But leg-exercise in the open air does take the sting out of grief. He was getting back his old spirits. Also his appetite. The cook-shops which lined the winding street up the hill sent forth savours to detain pilgrims who like him were hungry, but his pocket was as empty as his stomach, and the smell of roast meat was a tantalizing agony.

All the worse because his conscience was for once essentially clear. Even if he had lost Louise, he had committed no crime. The gold which he had brought from Paris for this journey was—or had been while it lasted—honest money, the unwilling but conscious gift of his godfather. If you do no wrong, you should be able to live unhounded. Also you should have food. Also you should not be visiting the south, far as weary feet could stagger, favouring the by-roads for greater privacy.

Now here he was under the tall uneven spires, beneath the portal, with a bit of the great door open to let the worshippers slip in. A handful of people hurried across the wide square. He would be safe. None but the pious worship on a weekday, and the pious shut their eyes or cover their face with their fingers.

So with a taste of peace in his soul he walked up the south aisle, through the echoing dampness of the majestic church, and sat down on a bench near the transept. Of course he should have knelt at once in prayer, but there

was such an ache in his legs, it seemed pardonable to let them too taste a minute's peace.

Even so early the light indoors was fading, and the fabulous windows began to stand out from the dark walls as though there were no walls at all but only detached, self-suspended glass. Candles burned before the high altar and in the chapels along the nave.

Master Villon, having rested his knees, now rubbed them with his hands and got down cautiously on the hard stone.

Not in the ordinary sense to pray. Facing towards the altar, he merely sank back on his heels, to save his kneecaps, and with bowed head and limp arms permitted his thoughts to wander.

He was thinking that if he had a quieter life he'd be a better man. To be so busily involved with Montigny and the others was worse than sinful; it was inconvenient. If once you entangle yourself with your fellows, you owe them loyalty and they'll collect the debt by stealing your time. For example. The heavenly powers had intended him, François Villon, to write poetry, yet for the making of verses, as God must know, a man needs a stretch of unbroken leisure. Also, the divine beneficence had endowed him with charm for women. In spite of his small black eyes, his bald head and his long nose, if he but looked at them they returned his gaze. Yet when he was on the very threshold of ecstasy, half-married, you might say, to Louise, Montigny and Guy must decide to hobnob with Peter Merchant, or some other stool-pigeon! How can you get on with the good life if you are interrupted?

Across the church another worshipper finished his devotion, got up rheumatically with audible scrapings of his feet, paid a final reverence to the altar, and went out. An oldish man but substantial, wearing the lengthy robes of the learned. Master Villon, having a practised eye for costume as well as for character, recognized a notary.

Reflecting on the incident, he found a salve for his conscience. Even a notary must have a moment to himself. Though you cultivate the society of the virtuous, avoiding

roisterers, pickpockets and other fodder for the noose, yet you cannot on that account be certain of happiness. The error is to embrace the world on any terms, good or evil. He saw that he should have chosen the monastic life, as his godfather had suggested, a bare cell, a few steps each day inside the cloister wall, a narrow window looking to the sky. At the very thought of such beatitude, once within his grasp but now hardly practicable, he was inclined to weep.

Yet a near-substitute might be contrived. If that notary should by miraculous chance be disposed to employ a clerk, and if Master Villon could pass himself off as a humble but earnest student of the law, and if the notary, whose lips were thin and thrifty, could be made to see the special advantage of an assistant who asked no salary beyond lodging and food and a few clear hours for meditation—why, then, Master Villon might slip out of his awkward past into a shelter from his friends and from the police, and attend to women only in so far as the memory of Louise would enrich the poems he would compose till death stopped the pen, in the dreamlike town of Chartres, under the towers of the cathedral.

He got off his knees with such a start that one or two old women glanced up from their beads, not wishing to miss anything, and it cost him an effort to move down the aisle at a decorous pace. Outside the door the twilight air chilled his ardour. He didn't know where the notary lived, and it would be dangerous to ask. Also, there might be more than one notary.

Perplexed but still determined, he sauntered down the hill, heading away from the open shops to explore the dark winding streets where doubtless the well-to-do lived.

Almost in the centre, a minute's walk from the courts of justice, he stopped to stare at a house which wasn't dark, which in fact seemed on fire. Two men were there before him, planted in the gutter, gazing up at the gleaming window—a stout man and a thin, each carrying on the shoulder a long pike. They rather than the lighted house detained him. He knew the mind of the city watch, in any city. To

hurry by would be a sign of guilt, to rub elbows would be innocence itself.

Master Villon slapped the stout watchman on the shoulder.

'It's burning, man! Where's the well?'

The stout watchman took the salute in good humour, without looking around.

'The notary wastes his candles to-night. A taper in every room.'

The thin watchman chuckled. 'Remember what he did, the last time he made up with his wife?'

Master Villon joined them in a guffaw, assuming that the joke must have been rich if you knew what it was, and when they moved off on their rounds he followed a little distance, then fell behind, then turned back thoughtfully to the notary's door.

A candle in every room! And he quarrelled with his wife! Master Villon raised his hand to knock. But then, there *was* a wife! Master Villon held his knuckles suspended. Then again, she might be old and toothless, and if she confined her annoying disposition to her husband . . . Master Villon knocked.

With his ear to the heavy wood he thought he heard voices—he was almost certain of a woman's voice and a man's—this might be one of their quarrels . . .

Suddenly the door swung inward, catching him there sideways, with his ear down. Before he could turn, nervous fingers around his throat cut off his wind, drew him within the house, pushed him backwards over the furniture till he was spread helpless on the floor.

'Quick, Ysabel!' gasped the notary, 'bring the long rope! I'll stand on him while you tie his legs and arms!'

Master Villon could hear Ysabel bolting the door again. Apparently these people contemplated murder. This church-going notary and the old hag his wife . . .

But she wasn't an old hag. Not at all. Master Villon, by a supreme effort, had just reached his dagger and got the point in play against the notary's ribs, and the notary with a most unheroic yelp had just taken his fingers from

the victim's gullet, and the victim had just leapt to his feet, when a handsome girl came back from her door-closing—a tall pleasant creature with big brown eyes and full lips, and elsewhere the sort of beauty that made you think it would bloom still more if it were encouraged.

Master Villon gave her a long look, and put the dagger away in his belt. From some perils you fight your way out; in other cases you let providence unfold its plans.

'Georges,' said the girl, 'this isn't the right man.' Master Villon noticed her voice had a leaning to the contralto.

'How do you know it isn't?'

'Would a thief knock at the front-door?'

'He is armed,' said the notary, keeping his distance.

'But why would he return so soon?'

'It's a plot,' said the notary. 'He's one of a gang, and they're sorry they didn't take all.'

Master Villon cleared his throat, to find if he still could speak.

'There's dust on his shoes,' said the girl. 'Maybe he's a pilgrim, pausing on his way to God.'

'You're an intelligent woman,' said Master Villon hoarsely, 'and it's a relief to find but one lunatic in this house.'

'There!' said she. 'I told you! He didn't steal the silver!'

'You're a fool, Ysabel, as usual! No pilgrim ever had that face.'

'My errand,' said Master Villon, 'was, I admit, secular, but it also was innocent. I'm a poor student of the civil law, and if the breath hadn't been squeezed out of me, I would have inquired whether the notary needs a clerk.'

'You look hungry,' said the girl.

Master Villon in an impulse of self-pity rubbed his hand over his stomach, where the notary had been kneeling.

'If you'll sit at the table here, my husband and you can talk while I bring food.'

'Not so fast, Ysabel, not so fast! We won't feed him. I've nothing to say to him. I don't need a clerk.'

'I have not applied for the position,' said Master Villon. 'It was my intention to do so, before you tried to choke me, but I shall now lay the case before the city magistrate.'

The notary opened his eyes wide. 'You'll accuse *me*?'

'Of assault and battery,' said Master Villon. 'Also, you assumed judicial functions which are not provided for in your licences. Without examination or other due process, you decided I was a thief and ordered me bound hand and foot.'

'He would make a good clerk,' said the girl. 'He knows the law.'

The notary wiped his brow with his hand. 'Someone stole a bag of my silver. I thought it might be you.'

'That's more sensible,' said the girl. 'Sit down and tell the young man about it while I fetch the soup.'

Her husband sank into a chair by the table, and Master Villon, not to be churlish, drew up beside him.

'A bag of silver,' repeated the notary.

'Was it your complete fortune?' asked Master Villon. 'Or only part of it?'

'What's that to you?'

'If you still have some money left,' said Master Villon, 'I shall find it harder to forgive your insanity. Also, I shall conclude the thief was a novice, or else you interrupted him at his work.'

The notary leaned forward. 'Precisely what I did! There was a slight noise in the house, like a sneeze. I called, "Who's there?" Immediate silence! My wife and I lighted candles in all the rooms. Not a vestige of the rascal! We had just come down from our search when you knocked.'

'Where,' said Master Villon, 'did you keep the coins?'

The notary frowned. 'I don't see the bearing of that question.'

'Since the money is gone,' said Master Villon, 'the worst is over and you needn't be nervous. I wondered if the thief had to go upstairs.'

'He surely did,' said the girl, coming in with the soup-bowl. 'The silver was in the chest at the foot of our bed.'

Her husband went purple. 'Will you never hold your tongue?'

'Begin on the broth while it's hot,' said she, pulling up a chair for herself.

'So far as I've studied the subject,' said Master Villon, blowing gently on his first spoonful, 'the thief usually gets out through a window, however he may have got in. We should therefore see which window has been disturbed, whether there's a print of his heels where he jumped, or a rope still hanging where he let himself down.'

'If you hope to work for me,' said the notary, 'you'll be more sparing of your words and less theoretical in your subject-matter. You scholars fresh from the schools!'

'But we *did* look at the windows!' said the girl. 'They were all tight-shut.'

'In that case,' said Master Villon, 'the thief is still in the house.'

'Then why are we clacking like washwomen?' said the notary, dropping his spoon in the soup and pushing back his chair.

'You might as well eat,' said the girl. 'You won't enjoy finding him. He'll probably be desperate.'

'I'll call the watch,' said the notary.

'They passed a quarter-hour ago,' said Master Villon. 'If you step fast you'll come up with them.'

'On the other hand,' said the notary, giving him a mean glance, 'I don't care to leave my wife unprotected.'

'Then I'll call the watch,' said Master Villon, looking around for his hat.

'Whether or not you are harmless,' said the notary, 'I'm not at all sure you would come back. On second thought you may stay here. You and my wife will deafen each other with your talk, and the thief will think there's a numerous company downstairs.' With that he unfastened the door and dashed into the street.

Master Villon walked over, shut the door again and pushed in the bolts.

'Thank you,' said the girl, who had gone back to her soup. 'He left it open when he came home from church. That's why we have a thief.'

Master Villon did not sit down. He was thinking.

'Did he take the key with him?'

'He did not,' said she, pulling it from her apron-pocket.

'Then he's locked out!'

'He is. And he won't find the watch, not for a good hour. They're never where you want them.'

When Master Villon remained standing, she seemed a bit annoyed. 'Don't you like your soup?'

'I am wondering,' said he, 'if I ought to stay. Your husband doesn't want a clerk, and this house is less quiet than I hoped.'

'Quiet?' She laughed. 'We're never quiet—but what home is?'

'My dream,' said he, 'was of a tranquil life, where by a minimum of toil I could earn leisure to cultivate my mind and write poems. Food, lodging and peace—that's all I ask.'

'It's a good deal,' said she, 'yet within reason we might supply it. There's a room in the roof with a decent bed and table. Have a look at it now, and if it satisfies . . .'

She was on her way to the stairs to show him up.

'Your husband,' said he, 'is sensitive, and the exertion of stair-climbing is taxing. Rest yourself here while I go alone.'

'It's the narrow door at the top,' said she, 'to the right.'

He wanted a chance to examine not the room but his own mind. The room was well enough—he was sure it would be. A clean bed, a strong chair, a table to write on, a closet to hang your clothes in, if you had a superfluous suit. He sat on the edge of the bed and thought.

The girl and her husband were clearly on each other's nerves. She was a wilful creature, awkward if she didn't like you, and worse perhaps if she did. To accept shelter in such a household would be a slap in the face of fortune.

On the other hand, the notary was somewhat in his power, because of that first mistake at the door, and employment in so respectable a home would be, for a tarnished reputation, much like a screen or a sponge. The old François Villon, rascal extraordinary, would cease to exist. The notary's clerk would be called—let's see—why not Jacques Thibaut? That would do. Jacques Thibaut, faithful servant, diligent student, regular churchgoer, enemy of all disorder—if he played his cards wisely he might in time

become one of the town fathers, or even mayor. No, that wasn't what he wanted—if he were truly wise he would remain obscure, unencumbered, free.

The girl came tiptoeing up the stairs and stood in the doorway, and one glimpse at her eye told him what would happen next. To do him justice, his heart sank.

She stepped over to the foot of the bed. 'Will you stay?'

'Your husband hasn't asked me.'

'It's not for him to decide,' said the girl. 'I've the right to choose who lives under my roof, and if this hadn't been my father's house, it wouldn't be over our heads now.'

'Aren't you rather severe with your husband?' said Master Villon. 'If you'll pardon a plain word, your method of handling him makes me think I ought to move on. It would ruffle my best moods, the way you and he go at each other.'

'It sounds worse than it is,' said she. 'He's perfect in his place, and I shan't let him stir out of it.'

When she sat on the bed, the double weight made the mattress sink, so they slid together.

'If you could try a month of us,' said she, 'I'd keep my voice low when I spoke to him.'

Against his judgement Master Villon's hand went out, for a better balance on the bed, and touching her well-moulded back, stole around the side.

'The moment you came in,' said she, leaning her head on his shoulder, 'I asked myself, what's a bag of silver?'

He knew this wasn't the quiet life, and he was a fool, but when she lifted her lips and her swimming eyes, he couldn't disappoint her, and when his other hand sought the fastening of her gown at the throat, her fingers helped him, and you might say that the cloth was rather more than off her shoulders when a loud sneeze echoed from the closet.

Master Villon got his knife ready in his right hand and with the left wrenched the door open. Huddled against the wall inside was his friend Montigny, with the stolen bag.

'For the love of God!' said Master Villon, forgetting himself.

'Who'd have thought it!' said Montigny with a broad grin.

Master Villon, with finger to lips, signalled discretion.

'Here's your thief,' said he, stepping aside so that the girl might have a look. When she felt Montigny's admiring eyes on her she hastened to pull up the gown.

'Fetch me that long rope your husband spoke of,' said Master Villon. 'I'll keep him quiet with my dagger.'

No sooner were they alone than Montigny came out of the closet, on easy terms with the world.

'Not so fast!' said Master Villon. 'Hand over the blade.'

Montigny drew back. 'What's got into you?'

'You'll play the part as I tell you,' said Master Villon, 'or you'll go downstairs a corpse.'

Montigny's lips put on a mean curl. 'When I tell them who *you* are,' said he, 'there'll be room for two of us on the gallows.'

'That very thought,' said Master Villon, 'occurred to me, and if I were a prudent man, instead of an old friend, I'd now run this knife through your neck.'

Montigny studied this argument, which had its merits. 'What do you want me to do?'

'I'll remove the dagger from your waist,' said Master Villon, using his left hand, and dropping the weapon on the top of the bed. 'When she returns you'll be sullen—not a word, no matter what happens.'

'I wish I could trust you!'

'Oddly enough,' said Master Villon, 'you can, though your presence happens to be unwelcome.'

'Let me go,' said Montigny, smiling, 'and you and she can finish what you began.'

'That too is probably beyond your understanding,' said Master Villon. 'She was as inconvenient as yourself.'

'Liar!' said Montigny. 'I saw no reluctance whatever.'

'Who mentioned reluctance?' said Master Villon. 'You have no eye for my inner spiritual state.'

Montigny had something on his tongue, but the girl came running up the stairs with the rope, and in a minute they had their prisoner fast in a web of knots.

'There we are!' said Master Villon. 'By this time your husband must have found the watch. We shan't wait long.'

Montigny's face clouded.

'If your husband,' continued Master Villon, 'follows his habit and dispenses with the formal processes of the law, we can hang the fellow from this window.'

Montigny seemed in danger of exploding.

'Meanwhile,' Master Villon went on, 'it might save time if you, being a notary's wife, made a deposition as to what occurred—where we discovered the criminal, what he was doing, what excuses, if any, he made. I'll sketch out the statement and you can sign it.'

With that he took from his pocket, from the inside of his jacket, a crumpled sheet or two, stored there for poetic uses. Reaching his hand in again he pulled out a pen, which he held up against the window, to examine the nib. Then he pulled the table over to the bedside, settled himself on the edge and squared off his elbows.

'Is there ink in the house?'

'I'll fetch some,' said the girl eagerly.

'Since you're going down anyway,' said Master Villon, 'you might replace this money-bag in your husband's chest. There will be a statement in the deposition that the thief took it and you yourself put it back.'

They listened to her descending with heavy steps, weighed down by the bag.

'You might have had half for your share,' said Montigny.

'Many of your ideas,' said Master Villon, 'come to you slowly.'

Montigny lost his temper. 'Play me false,' and see what you get!'

'Quiet!' said Master Villon. 'We're supposed to be hating each other in silence.'

They waited till she ran up the stairs with the ink-horn.

'Now, then,' said Master Villon. He scratched a paragraph and held it up at arm's length. 'I, Ysabel, lawful wife of the notary of Chartres, do here depose that on this day, October the thirtieth, a little past eight o'clock in the evening, I

was seated on the bed in our smallest upstairs room with Jacques Thibaut, my husband's clerk.'

'That has nothing to do with the crime!' said the girl.

'In cases like these,' said Master Villon, 'it is best to tell at the beginning what is sure to come out later, and I saw the fellow looking at the part of you which was uncovered. He may mention it in the torture-chamber. We'll just state it boldly and get it out of the way.'

'You will, will you?' said the girl. 'I'll never sign my name to that!'

Master Villon began to enjoy himself. 'My dear lady, if the thief confesses it, and if my testimony is asked for, I shall be compelled to admit the truth. Not compelled, proud. You were about to confer upon me one of the great privileges of my life, and if I can immortalize the moment in an official document . . .'

'My husband will kill you!'

'The terrors of death,' said Master Villon, 'are exaggerated. We may, in fact, die together, but I have frequently looked forward to a less happy end.'

'You should begin where he sneezed,' said the girl.

'But you saw him,' said Master Villon, 'and you must explain how you came to be here. Especially since he, on his part, saw you. Perhaps the report should explain that you insisted on following me up here, though, as you will recall, I wished to come alone.'

The girl seized Montigny's dagger from where it was lying on the bed-blanket. 'You'll say that, will you?'

'You might, of course, write the deposition yourself,' said Master Villon, 'but I fear you don't know the legal form.'

'You are two of a kind,' said the girl, her wrath increasing. 'He's a thief, and you're worse, and when I tell my husband the treatment I had from you . . .'

A loud thundering from below brought her to a pause.

'There's your husband now,' said Master Villon, 'with the watch. Go down and tell him whatever you like. Don't forget to fasten that button at your throat.'

The knocking continued. The girl was in no hurry. Her

anger had evaporated. 'I meant nothing rude,' said she, 'but I still see no point . . .'

'If you don't let him in soon,' said Master Villon, 'he may smash the door.'

The girl still hesitated. 'Give me that paper,' she said.

Master Villon put the parchment back in his pocket, with the pen.

'It will do you no good,' said she. 'I didn't sign it.'

The noise at the door was furious.

'If I let him in,' said the girl, 'what will you tell him?'

Master Villon smiled at her, till the shouts from the street broke her will. Even then, she went downstairs slowly.

Master Villon accompanied her to the head of the steps, put his hand around her neck and lifted her chin for a kiss.

'Should the occasion arise,' said he, 'tell your husband to be thankful for what he has.'

Yet he made another speech, back in the attic room. 'Had it not been for her—and you . . .'

When the notary raced up with the stout watchman and the thin, one end of the long rope was anchored around the foot of the bed. The other end hung out the window, and the window was wide-open.

*Water at hand, and yet I die of thirst!
 With fire consumed, I shiver, tooth on tooth;
 I am a stranger where I saw life first,
 And age has come upon me in my youth.
 Clad in these silks, yet naked as a worm,
 In tears I laugh, and push on through despair,
 From one wrecked hope a vainer hope I form,
 And look for pleasure, though no joy is there.
 Powerful, feeble, turn and turn about,
 Welcomed a while, but later on thrown out.*

*I count on nothing but the unforeseen,
 I puzzle only over what is clear,
 I never doubt unless the proof is clean,
 My chicken logic picks truth here and here.
 Give me what wealth you will, I'll lose it all,
 I'll say good evening when it's hardly noon,
 Lay me upon my back, and still I'll fall,
 Fill me with food, and I'll be starving soon.
 Leave me your manners, and I'll die a lout,
 Welcomed a while, but later on thrown out.*

*Lazy from birth, I've risked a leg or arm
 Mending my roof; look at it, how it leaks!
 Who speaks most kindly of me, does most harm,
 Who speaks what's true as gospel, slander speaks.
 A friend is he who lets me understand
 That a white swan is nothing but black crow;
 My enemy holds me out a helping hand—
 Evil and good being one, or mingled so,
 And I myself being mixed both ways, no doubt—
 Welcomed a while, but later on thrown out.*

*Prince, may it please your kindness, I who know
 Too much of life, have never learned to live.
 A purse, my lord, if you have such to give,
 Would help—a thin one, or much more, a stout—
 Welcome, I swear, until the gold runs out!*

He Goes Where He Is Wanted

MONTIGNY WENT DOWN THE ROPE FIRST, BECAUSE HE was nervous, and because Master Villon hoped he would run off in the darkness. But he didn't. Sliding to the ground, Master Villon saw he still had company on his hands.

They stumbled through the notary's garden, got over the wall into the dimly lighted street, and struck southward at a leisurely pace, to deceive whoever might be abroad.

'We'll be stopped at the gate,' said Montigny.

'This isn't Paris,' said Master Villon. 'There are but two watchmen, and they're searching the house for you.'

'Where do we go now?'

'We?' said Master Villon.

Montigny didn't like the tone. 'I'm not good enough for you, is that it?'

'It is,' said Master Villon. 'You won't give up theft, and I will. The ways part.'

They passed under a lamp, and watched their shadows stretch ahead.

'If you didn't want the silver,' said Montigny, 'I could have used it. Lend me a gold piece.'

'I haven't a sou,' said Master Villon. 'Go back and rob the notary again.'

Montigny plodded by his side, in resentful gloom, till they were past the town limits at the foot of the hill, and safely out on the plain.

'Peter Merchant . . .' he began.

'Put your mind on something cheerful,' said Master Villon. 'He was a spy, you and Tabarie drank too much, and the provost knows all. We shan't see Paris again.'

'It wasn't my fault,' said Montigny. 'If Guy Tabarie had stayed sober . . .'

'That smoke was up the chimney long ago,' said Master Villon. 'It's to-morrow I'm thinking of. Where are you going?'

'How should I know? Where are you?'

'I'm not telling,' said Master Villon. 'No more traffic with those who can't hold their tongue.'

'You were always something of a rat,' said Montigny, trudging along the road. Master Villon took no offence. The criticism fell in with his own opinion, now that he was humble.

'You're leaving us, I suppose, because of the danger.'

Master Villon could agree with that too, but for him the word meant what Montigny wouldn't understand.

'If they catch you, you'll blab!'

'I will not,' said Master Villon, 'and I don't intend to be caught.'

'What were you doing in the notary's house?'

Master Villon set his jaw and marched in silence.

At early dawn they staggered into Châteaudun, muscle-spent and hungry.

'God!' said Montigny, by way of morning prayer, sitting on the pavement at the turn of a street and taking off his shoes.

'You won't get them on again,' said Master Villon, by way of comfort.

'Let me die here!' groaned the blistered walker.

'Where you please,' said Master Villon, 'but I'm going on.'

'We've had nothing to eat,' said Montigny.

'Get used to it! If we asked for a crumb, they'd remember us.'

'François, come back! You won't leave me, will you?'

Master Villon was sorry for the man, with his bold air sweated out of him, seated in the street with his stockings and his shoes off. But he had left Montigny some time ago.

'It's either Orleans or Blois,' said he. 'You take one and I take the other.'

'Which is nearer?'

'Orleans—south-east.'

'Blois for you, then,' said Montigny, 'and Satan pull your long nose, as I'd like to!'

Master Villon, in flight as usual, didn't much care which way he fled. Since Montigny chose the road to Orleans,

he'd take the road to Blois. The main thing was to separate. Montigny and he had been partners in crime long enough. He had lost his taste for Montigny—and for crime. The road to Blois would do very well.

Very well indeed, as he trudged on alone and began to think. The duke might be at Blois. Of course he'd be there, idling in his great castle. Duke Charles! What hadn't that man done for him already—picking him out of tight places, with a lift here and a saving pull there! If it hadn't been for the duke, Marguerite, that lovely but dangerous lady—Master Villon had an idea! The road to Blois was the path of fate! Duke Charles and none other could help him to Louise, sweet and true, good and therefore inaccessible.

Around the castle gate at Blois he found commotion. A score of grooms waited, a cluster of men-at-arms, a shining captain with a feather in his helmet. Master Villon joined the citizens, to learn what was in the wind.

Two swordsmen were warning the curious now and again to leave a space clear. Master Villon addressed the public in general. 'Who's coming?'

A fellow at his elbow showed surprise. 'Why, the duke rides home from the hunt.'

'Ah—to be sure!' Master Villon pushed through where the duke must notice him.

A horn echoed from a near-by street, the sightseers rustled forward, the guards spread them out again. All but one.

'Stand back, will you?'

'I've an appointment with him,' said Master Villon, 'and he likes to find me with the middle of his eye.'

The fellow sank his sword-hilt in Master Villon's stomach, and there would have been an argument if the cavalcade hadn't appeared across the square. When the sword-hilt saluted, Master Villon went back to where he was before he lost his balance.

First came the stag, drooping over a saddle. Then the duke, unscathed by his sixty years. The onlookers applauded. As he slowed his horse to wave greetings, his eye fell on the dusty figure.

'If you ask me,' he called, 'you won't stop here!'
It wasn't the word Master Villon was waiting for. 'My lord, if I might speak to you in private . . .'

'You choose the wrong time!'

'But I have no choice!'

The duke frowned at the swordsman. 'Bring him in.'

Then he touched his spur and the procession followed, two by two, more fine women than you'd hope for in one place, each with a gentleman to match.

The second couple from the last were brilliant above the others, the woman particularly. Her companion was telling a story and she was laughing.

'Now then,' said the guard, 'move your feet!'

The woman looked down and stopped laughing. Master Villon knew who she was. He had no wish to enter the same house with her.

'The duke is occupied; I'll talk with him another day,' said he, reflecting on this mystery of the past, that the good in it departs in a straight line, but the evil moves in a circle and meets you again.

The guard shoved him inside the gate. 'When he says bring you, you get brought!'

Duke Charles was in his room, on the chest at the end of his bed, with a lackey pulling at each boot.

'Saint Michel and all the lesser angels!'

'My lord,' said Master Villon, 'I'm sorry I'm not welcome.'

The duke put hands under one knee, to pull his leg loose. 'Bring me slippers, and leave us.'

Master Villon, squeezing his cap in his fingers, stood dutifully on his weary feet.

'Now then,' said the duke when they were alone, 'you're out of jail for the moment?'

'My present faults,' said Master Villon, 'are poverty and hunger.'

He spoke bitterly, and the duke studied him. No other in France would have recognized beneath that soiled appearance the poet of his time. Duke Charles, who himself made verses, envied the vagabond before him. If you are

poor, you can sing freely. Unless you are born a duke, you can wander in the streets, hobnob with humanity, get the smack of life, and speak out. But it isn't for the polite to notice or mention the raw nerve of truth.

'God put poetry in your hands! Why the devil don't you behave?'

'My lord,' said Master Villon, 'I stopped for help, but it might be better if I moved on.'

'It might indeed!' said the duke with a half-smile. 'I marvel at your folly.'

'So help me,' said Master Villon, 'I didn't know she was here!'

'Who's here?'

'Lady Marguerite.'

'Oh—that!' said the duke, remembering. 'She's the least of your troubles!'

'My lord, I presume to disagree! In a woman the instinct of revenge . . .'

'François, you try my patience! What have you done now?'

'Now, my lord?'

'In Paris. What did you steal?'

'Before God, my lord, nothing! Absolutely nothing! Not recently.'

'Ah!' said the duke. 'I knew we'd get to the bottom.'

'You won't believe it,' said Master Villon, 'but I'm now leading a good life.'

The duke sharpened his glance. 'What did you steal?'

Master Villon scratched the back of his head. 'The last time was—two friends and I—but it was long ago, my lord.'

The duke stood up, angry. 'What did you steal?'

Master Villon stiffened his own back. 'I'll never tell you, my lord. You might misunderstand.'

The duke's eyebrows drew down. 'I've known you to do everything but rob a church. Was it that?'

Master Villon said nothing.

'At any moment,' said the duke, 'I expect a visitor from Paris.'

Master Villon faced him steadily. The duke sat down again on the clothes-chest, and looked up at his poet.

'A very distinguished man—with a warrant for your arrest.'

Master Villon didn't twitch an eye.

'You know who it is?'

'The provost, my lord?'

The duke waited for the right answer.

'My lord—could it be the Seigneur de Grigny?'

'As I feared,' said the duke, 'you're guilty!'

Master Villon dropped his mask. 'He entertained me in his home!'

'That makes him share the blame, I suppose,' said the duke. 'What did you do to him?'

'I fell in love with Louise.'

The duke lifted a hopeless hand. 'With Mademoiselle de Grigny?'

'I call her Louise, my lord. She returns my affection. I hope to marry her.'

The duke started to laugh, then checked himself. 'Move on, François, while there's still time!'

'With your permission, my lord, I'll stay.'

'You insist on suicide?'

'My lord—is she coming with him?'

The duke looked at him, grimly at first, then with a smile creeping to the side of his mouth. 'Is there a new poem in your pocket?'

'Not one,' said Master Villon. 'I haven't had time for it.'

'Understand this,' said the duke. 'When he arrives, I shan't interfere. I shan't try to save you.'

There was a respectful knock on the door, and the head-steward made an obsequious but impressive entrance. A stoutish fellow, with an air of destiny.

'What is it, Gaston?'

'The table to-night, my lord?'

'François Villon will sit on my left.'

Gaston raised his eyebrows.

'Put Master Villon in the room near me, the third down

the hall. He's to recite a new poem after dinner. He'll need a suit of clothes, and you might send up the barber.'

'My lord! I told you, I have no new poem!'

'You will have. Go now—let Gaston take care of you.'

Master Villon derived no pleasure at all from the bath, the shave, and the clean linen on his skin. In Gaston he suspected an under-stream of contempt, and the barber seemed amused with what he had to work on. Moreover, the suit Gaston furnished was much too gay. Louise would know it wasn't his. And in the midst of this turmoil he was to produce a poem! He tried to think of a subject while Gaston helped him into his breeches.

That garment was only half laced when a lackey stuck his head through the doorway, without knocking. 'The Lady Marguerite desires conversation with you—first door on the left, at the end of the corridor. At once. She'll leave the door open.'

'Will she!' said Master Villon, but the lackey was gone. Master Villon helped Gaston finish with the other leg.

So Marguerite was at work again—she who had loved him, and then tried to kill him, and now was angry because, thanks to the duke, he still lived!

'Is there paper and pen?'

Gaston pointed to the writing-table.

'Ah—of course,' said Master Villon, leaning over and scratching hastily. 'If you'll be so good as to carry this note to her, I can . . .' he read it, to make sure, and corrected a word . . . 'I can get into the jacket myself.'

Gaston paused, for thanks in advance, but Master Villon had turned to the mirror, to wrestle with the ruffles of his shirt. The steward went out with a wrinkle in his brow.

The writing of the note had warmed Master Villon up. The jacket once on, he sat down and squared off at his poem. Something sharp and smart. The quill began to move fast.

That night they dined in what Duke Charles called his office, a fair-sized apartment on the ground-floor, with a small fire to cure the evening dampness, and brackets holding candles out from the tapestries.

'We'll be cosier here,' said the duke. 'The banquet-hall's no more cheerful than a barn. Poetry never sounds well in it.'

'Oh, will you read us a poem?' said Lady Marguerite. 'How charming!'

'François Villon,' said the duke, bringing forward what Gaston had put clothes on. 'You know him, I believe?'

The beautiful woman with the waving black hair, the white teeth, the cream and rose in her cheeks, smiled like a saint.

'The name of course, and a few of his works—dainty little things—if I heard them once more, I'd have them by heart.'

When Master Villon met her eye, she smiled even more sweetly, and he smiled back, in tribute to impudence, and the duke smiled too, admiring them both.

'We'll be seated,' said he, putting Lady Marguerite at his right. Master Villon took the chair facing her.

He spread his napkin deliberately, to show that such conveniences were a habit with him, and for still greater ease of manner he stared at the men and women who lined the board. The ladies, he observed, were more dashing than on horseback—an evening gown helps a woman out. The men had lost brilliance. They whispered, and kissed a hand now and then, but Master Villon feared it was to fill a pause in their thoughts. They should have kept on riding. Only the duke was at home indoors.

'The soup we shall now sample,' said he, 'is an old favourite of mine, savoury but not fattening. I had the recipe from England, where they serve it to prisoners.'

The woman at Master Villon's left exclaimed under her breath.

'The wine,' continued the duke, 'comes from my best vineyard. In this nectar we drink only the health of lovers and poets.'

The guests, pair by pair, started an exchange of compliments.

'Marguerite,' said the duke, leaving no stone unturned, 'I thought I knew all your passions. Since when have you been interested in poetry?'

Master Villon, after his long fast, ought to have taken the soup before the wine. One long sip from his goblet, and his mood became suddenly exalted.

'My lord, may I tell your guests who I am?'

There was a note in his voice which produced silence.

'Would you really tell?' asked Lady Marguerite, softly but distinctly.

He glared at her. 'I am Poverty in person. Here I have food, but elsewhere I am Hunger. Rather than starve, I have stolen.'

The stillness was awkward, no one being ready for truth.

'I've heard,' said Lady Marguerite, 'you're a mad enemy of women.'

'The very clothes I wear,' continued Master Villon, 'are not mine. In myself I am naked as a worm. My lord dressed me. I am here against his will.'

'François!' said the duke quietly.

'I know you all!' cried Master Villon. 'All of you! If you are remembered hereafter, I shall be the cause!'

'François!' The duke was roused.

Master Villon's head cleared unexpectedly. 'I have some new verses . . .'

'Not now, François!'

'My lord, they concern only me.'

He drew from his pocket a strip of paper, which he held to the table candle.

'Water at hand, and yet I die of thirst;
With flame consumed, I shiver, tooth on tooth;
I am a stranger where I saw life first,
And age has come upon me in my youth.
Clad in these silks, yet naked as a worm . . .'

'I wondered where you found that phrase,' said Lady Marguerite. 'You quoted from yourself.'

Master Villon kept his finger on the page.

'Clad in these silks, yet naked as a worm,
In tears I laugh, and push on through despair,

From one wrecked hope a vainer hope I form,
And look for pleasure, though no joy is there.
Powerful, feeble, turn and turn about,
Welcomed a while, but later on thrown out.'

¶

'My lord,' said Lady Marguerite, 'your guest becomes personal, don't you think?'

As Master Villon looked first at her, then at the duke, there was a rattle of wheels in the court outside.

'See who that is, Gaston.'

The company buzzed with talk after the strain of listening to poetry. The page fell from Master Villon's hand, and one corner of it sank slowly into his unfinished soup. He knew who it was. He was not surprised when Gaston flung open the door to let in the Seigneur de Grigny, with his trim white beard, and his fierce eyes.

'Can a man walk into this house unannounced? You must think you live in a safe country, Charles!'

Master Villon stood up, where the seigneur could see him. 'Ah . . . !'

Louise's father exploded in a loud exclamation, which trailed off into silence. The duke was half-way to the door.

'I'm mortified beyond words, de Grigny! Gaston, another plate! I expected your charming daughter.'

'One of the maids,' said the seigneur, 'is dusting her off upstairs.'

'Two plates, Gaston!'

'What's that, standing there?' demanded the seigneur.

'A poet,' said the duke, 'under my protection.'

Master Villon bowed.

'Let me present my other guests also,' said the duke, with just a shade of haste.

'This is the one I wished to see!'

'You can renew your acquaintance at leisure,' said the duke. 'The Lady Marguerite here deserves a glance or two.'

Around the table the men were standing, and the ladies lifted a hand for the seigneur's greeting, or rose to let Gaston get in his extra plates.

Master Villon turned, at a footstep on the stairs, and saw Louise, sweet-faced, clear-eyed, but very pale. He felt a clutch at his heart.

'Here we are!' said the duke. 'Now my house is honoured indeed! These friends of mine—Lady Marguerite—François Villon . . .'

Master Villon saw the start she gave at his name, the effort not to show surprise. He bowed low. Lady Marguerite was watching like a cat.

'We were hardly well into the soup,' said the duke, seating Louise half-way down the table, where her father wouldn't be worried about her. 'You've lost no ground you can't make up. We have the evening before us.'

For the next minute or so Master Villon's mind, as you might say, left his body. There was meat on the dish, but he didn't touch it.

'How did you lose the road?' the duke was asking. 'You might have been here three hours ago.'

'Can't we talk of something cheerful?' said Louise, forcing a smile. 'We're here at last, aren't we?'

'I never lose the road,' said the seigneur, from his end of the board. 'We paused over a little business of the provost's.'

'Must I hear of it again?' said Louise.

'Rarely,' said her father, 'have I seen a rogue more neatly bagged.'

Louise turned still whiter.

'You mean, you caught someone?' asked Lady Marguerite, full of polite curiosity.

'Madame,' said the seigneur, 'he robbed a church, he and his friends, and the crime would have lain hidden till doomsday if a good man hadn't disguised himself and gained the confidence of these evil-doers while they were in their cups.'

'God created everything with a purpose,' said Lady Marguerite. 'That's the use of drunkenness, to catch criminals.'

'They were all drunk, but we caught only one,' said the seigneur, not impressed with her sketch of God's will.

'That is, only one until to-day. We knew of at least two accomplices. We had men on the road to Orleans—none, unfortunately, on the road to Blois.'

Master Villon held his breath.

'I'd like to hear the rest of it,' said the duke calmly.

'On the Orleans road,' said the seigneur, watching Master Villon, 'we stopped Montigny. The wretch's feet had collapsed. He said the gallows would be easier than another mile. He'll find out.'

'Who's the third you're looking for?' asked Lady Marguerite.

'The net,' said the seigneur, 'is over him.'

Lady Marguerite glanced along the table at Louise. 'You're not saying a word!'

'Father tells his own stories,' said the pale girl.

After that the talk wandered mercifully, and Master Villon fed on his thoughts, till the guests separated for the night. When the chairs were pushing back he walked up to the seigneur.

'May I have a word with you?'

'We do not speak!'

'We must,' said Master Villon.

The seigneur turned his back, and all the company saw the rebuke.

Master Villon bowed, walked without haste to the door, and up the painful stairs. He half-expected an arresting hand on his shoulder. In the corridor above he passed a shadowed alcove, then slipped back and hid in the darkness till the duke came by, leading the seigneur to his rest.

'No, Charles,' the seigneur was saying, 'he's beyond your help! When I leave this house, he goes with me.'

Master Villon noted where the seigneur was sleeping. He tiptoed to his own room and sat on the bed, to think.

That Louise still loved him, he could not believe. In Paris she had seen a girl disgrace him—now he was wanted for an ancient and notorious theft. A lady might be broad-minded, but you couldn't ask too much. Though his heart yearned for her a thousand years, she would always be

beyond his reach. Strangely, he wished her to be. Rather than drag her down, he would gladly hang.

But he might as well go out with a flourish! There was no one now in the corridor. He stepped softly to the seigneur's door and knocked, then pushed in without waiting for an invitation.

The bearded man, his enemy, all but unclad, glared at him.

'What's this?'

'Seigneur, I wish to arrange my fate.'

'It is arranged!'

Master Villon closed the door, for greater privacy.

'Towards you and your family, I would act with strict honour.'

'Will you kindly get out?'

'You perhaps know,' said Master Villon, 'I'm a suitor for your daughter's hand.'

'God give me patience!' said the seigneur, looking around for a weapon.

'Since I met your daughter, I've stuck to a straight path. That is, within reason.'

The seigneur picked up his sword by the hilt. 'If you mention my daughter again...'

'Until you kill me, seigneur, I shall continue to think of her.'

They looked at each other.

'Seigneur, that is all I came to say.'

The bearded man waited for him to go.

'One thing more,' said Master Villon. 'During our visit here, may I speak to her alone, or only in your presence?'

The seigneur was too angry to indicate a choice.

'One half-hour with her,' said Master Villon. 'Grant me that, and hang me whenever you like. Think it over, seigneur. A pleasant sleep to you!'

Midway down the corridor he met Lady Marguerite. There wasn't time to guess where she came from, or on what errand. Her smile was cordial.

'I liked your poem.'

He bowed.

'Are you really dying of thirst? Do you still love me?'
'Madame! Are we not meeting as strangers?'

'François—have you met someone else?'

Without waiting for his reply, she laughed. 'Why didn't you come to me before dinner?'

'Madame, did you think I could forgive?'

She raised her white shoulders. 'Neither you nor I! How simple it makes things to be frank! To-morrow morning I shall . . .'

He saw a change in her face, and was aware of someone coming up behind him.

'What's this now?' said the duke. 'May I escort you to your room, Lady Marguerite?'

She laughed. 'I can find my way without a guard, if no more poets interrupt me. I was saying, what delicious verse he writes!'

The duke put his arm through Master Villon's, and pulled him off towards bed.

'François,' said he, 'you're unbelievable! Have you not danger enough?'

'My lord,' said Master Villon, 'you should have heard my poem to the end. The last lines were addressed to you.'

But at the threshold of his room he dropped the mask, and showed himself to his friend, worn and haggard.

'My lord, if I speak too boldly, it's because I have so little courage left.' Yet before he had unlaced his gay coverings, his wits were at work again. His own dusty clothes hung in the closet. He tried the window and found it unbolted. He looked out. A narrow balcony ran the length of the house. There might be a stairway, or a water-pipe, or a slope in the wall. Not that the seigneur would leave them unguarded, but since the choice was hanging . . .

Master Villon dressed for the road.

The window was easy. He crawled away from that end of the house where he knew Lady Marguerite was lodged. Safe now, with only the last window to get by, he heard his name. Louise, with a dark cloak around her shoulders, was watching him, from her room.

'Brave, whatever else you are!' she whispered. 'I knew you would come!'

He rose, and his lips almost met hers. 'Kiss me—before I die!'

She drew back, and it seemed to him she laughed. 'You will outlive us all. You will slip off, and my father won't find you, and I'll see you no more, and when the moon is young again you'll invite some other girl to look over her shoulder and make a wish.'

'Think poorly of me when I am gone,' said he, 'but give me this moment!'

In the starry dimness he felt her eyes on him.

'You were not true,' he heard her say. 'You will be false again. And I love you!'

'Never false—not to you!' he began, but she silenced him with her warm soft hand.

'Don't waste the time,' she said. 'You know why father came here. What will you do?'

He drew himself up, across the window-sill, and had his arms around her, a long minute. When her lips were free again, she laughed breathlessly.

'What will you do—besides that?'

Master Villon, on the threshold of unlooked-for happiness, found his head in a whirl. 'Louise—you have forgiven me!'

'I should think not!' she said. 'I haven't forgiven. Can you escape? Can I help?'

Master Villon got a grip on his old self. 'I wouldn't leave this house while you were in it. Your father and I have had one plain talk . . .'

'François! You dared to face him?'

'A moment ago, in his room. He and I are to discuss my affairs in more detail to-morrow. Louise—if I slip away, will you come?'

She laughed again. 'Now wouldn't that be simple! You and I limping down the road, with father's men jumping out from behind the bushes! I saw them take that poor fellow, you know.'

For a moment he thought of Montigny, then the worry

mingled with his heartache, and he reached through the window for another kiss. She pushed him away.

'They will find you, François—you must go.'

In a gust of madness he began to climb through the window. 'You are mine—let them find me here!'

'You haven't explained,' said she calmly, 'what that girl in Paris—I forget her name—was doing...'

He lowered himself to the balcony again. 'Louise, I swear...'

'Don't!' she said. 'Don't make me sorry I still love you.'

He seized her hand. 'Will you be up early to-morrow—before your father and I...'

'At dawn.'

'Then, one kiss!'

He was sinking to the balcony, to crawl towards his room.

'François—I have another rival. Lady Marguerite. She came to me after dinner. She has promised to tell me all she knows about you.'

Master Villon's bed was soft, but what with one thing and another, he didn't sleep.

THE APPEAL

*Only say yes,
My noble love, my own!
One syllable alone
Will cure and bless!*

*Oh, kind beyond belief
You could not turn away,
Could you? The word is brief—
Easy to say.*

*Faithful yet torn with fear,
My soul waits for a sound.
See, from what lowly ground
I look up! Do you hear?
Only say yes!*

He Asks For Kindness

BEFORE DAWN MASTER VILLON WAS STANDING IN HIS bare skin, examining in the half-light first one suit and then the other. He had no practice in such a choice. What he took off usually went on again. But now the duke would perhaps expect him to grace the company, so long as he remained a guest, with the clean silken things the steward had provided. Yet the dusty breeches and jerkin he had tramped the roads in were part of himself, stretched and moulded to his joints, and if he should have to leave the castle suddenly, because of the seigneur, he could move with comfort in no fresher wrappings. A foot-traveller in court dress! They'd arrest him at the next village.

He wasn't the only one who rose early. When he looked for Louise downstairs, he found her in the garden, with a lace over the shoulders of her gown, to keep off the morning mist; but Lady Marguerite was there too, dispensing beauty and mischief, and he heard voices from the windows, women laughing as they dressed. They'd all be there in a moment.

'I admired those garments last night,' said Lady Marguerite, as he walked up. 'Is it a hunting costume?'

Master Villon kissed Louise's hand. 'The day begins well,' said he. 'We have a clear sun.'

'You may kiss my hand too,' said Marguerite, holding it out. Louise laughed.

'Ask him,' said Marguerite, 'what you just asked me.'

He glanced at Louise and saw the smile go out of her face. 'Nothing, François—nonsense! I shouldn't have said it. I'm always stupid in the morning!'

'She wants to know,' continued Marguerite, 'what special reason the provost has for hating you.'

Master Villon kept his temper. 'I'm not good at guessing.'

Lady Marguerite smiled, but lowered her eyelids, ever so little. 'Why guess, when you can inquire?'

'Inquire elsewhere, then,' said he. 'The provost does what he thinks is his duty.'

'In your case,' said Marguerite, 'he does it with enthusiasm . . . Louise, did you ask the provost's wife?'

Louise seemed to think the unpleasant subject was safely behind them. Her face brightened. 'You know, I wanted Ambroise to come with us, but her husband wouldn't let her. She adores that man.'

'It's chilly standing,' said Master Villon. 'Shall we walk?'

Marguerite stepped away. 'You take one end of the garden, I'll take the other.'

'No, Marguerite . . .' Louise protested.

Master Villon drew his arm through hers.

'Manners cost time! I'm leaving to-day—will you come with me?'

She disengaged her arm. 'Do you want father to see?'

'Behind that arbour then! . . . Now, will you come?'

She laughed nervously. 'Always the same question!'

'Always the same. Will you?'

'When?'

'This afternoon, perhaps—to-night . . .'

'And where to, François?'

He looked hurt. 'Is it a place you love, or me?'

She faced him with her clear, honest eyes. 'I was ready to run away with you before, when that girl came . . .'

'My sorrow,' said he, 'my punishment!'

'It doesn't matter,' said Louise. 'I've thought it down, trodden it out of my mind . . .'

'You brought it up last night, and here it is again!'

'François—you wouldn't want me not to care, would you?'

'Come with me!' he cried. 'We'll hide in the south—I can work in the vineyards—there'll be a ship for England now and then—the duke has seen them—with barrels from Bordeaux!'

'I'm to sail with the wine, am I?'

He stared at her. 'You are right. I can promise nothing. Hunger, peril, my bad name—nothing else!'

She put her hand on his shoulder. 'I told you—I love you!'

'Words! You spoke words! I ask, what will you do?'

'My dear! What else *can* we do?'

'Don't you know?'

When the seigneur came upon them, they were midway in their kiss, but the white-beard gave sign neither of disapproval nor of surprise. It was Louise who was embarrassed.

'Have you found each other so soon?' asked her father. 'Master Poet, reassure me—am I here in time?'

At the mocking courtesy Louise looked frightened. Master Villon noticed that the seigneur carried no sword, nor, in any obvious place, a knife.

'Seigneur, I asked your permission to speak with your daughter alone...'

'So you did,' said the seigneur. 'And I see what you meant by speech. May I have a few words with you now? I mean words.'

'At your service, seigneur.'

Louise's father turned to her with a bow.

'Lady Marguerite says you keep her waiting, daughter—just beyond the rose-bushes.'

Master Villon knew she would have looked towards him, before she walked away, if the seigneur's eyes had afforded her a chance.

'Now that we can give each other our full attention,' said the old man, enjoying his control of the moment, 'shall we sit down? These narrow garden benches—the duke might give us better furniture!'

'If you please, seigneur, I prefer to stand.'

'Ah, yes—young legs—to be sure! Well, Master des Loges...'

'The name is Villon, seigneur—François Villon.'

'Of course—pardon! The provost said Villon, clearly enough. The warrant says so too. Master Villon, you are, in effect, my prisoner.'

Master Villon inclined his head.

'Since we agree on that point, I may proceed. You asked me yesterday, not whether I would permit you to speak with my daughter, that being a privilege you could seize without my help, but whether I'd prefer that you saw her privately or in my presence.'

'Seigneur, if I may explain...'

'Oh, don't, I beg! Don't explain!' The seigneur raised a hand, to protest more politely. 'Let conduct explain itself. Forgive my rudeness last night, not to ask for your own preference—whether you wished to meet her alone, or with me.'

Master Villon's tongue wouldn't move.

'I appreciate your embarrassment at such a question—any reply would cast upon me or her an unintended slight. There is but one happy way out—you have met her alone; I must now arrange the three-cornered conference which you proposed.'

'Seigneur, I shall be too much honoured...'

'We agree on that point also. Good! Now, Master Villon, my daughter does not bestow her kisses so prodigally as some women you may have known. Don't take offence—I pay you a tribute. You are the first she has honoured—or that is my belief. My pride in her is such that I see you, as it were, touched with the glamour of an ancient family. You'll forgive our conceit, will you not? In a remote sense you are now allied to my house. There would be a blot on the name if you were hanged.'

'Put your mind at rest,' said Master Villon, stung beyond patience. 'I shan't insist on the hanging.'

'I was sure you wouldn't,' said the seigneur. 'After her arms around your neck—the rope! Impossible! Do you care to suggest a substitute?'

'Seigneur, I am innocent! If you bring me before the Paris court...'

'Ah, I perceive your error! Court! The warrant with which I am supplied says nothing about a trial—it calls for an execution.'

'You can't—the judge must hear my side of it!'

'I'm no lawyer,' said the seigneur, 'and I avoid arguments. The warrant is for my protection, not for yours. Shall we return to the subject? Hanging won't do. How may I dispose of you?'

Master Villon met him with a steady eye. 'Seigneur, you are a gentleman. Also, you are her father. I am in your hands.'

'Well said!' exclaimed the seigneur. 'I like your tone. Since you leave it to me, I'll think out something satisfactory to us both.' He rose from the garden bench. 'Bless me, marble's nothing at all to sit on! I've been keeping you from the ladies.'

Master Villon watched him stride off towards the castle, and in his heart admired his implacable foe, and regretted the wasted years which now forbade friendship with such a man. Then he shook off melancholy, and went to rescue Louise from Lady Marguerite, just beyond the rose-bushes.

But they had already joined the other guests in the hall, where the duke was making himself gracious to the whole company, and whatever Marguerite had told Louise, Master Villon couldn't ask in public. That some confidences had been exchanged, he knew from their faces when he approached. Louise was standing at an open window, looking down. She might have seen him come in from the garden. Marguerite was in the midst of a story. They greeted him with a smile that shut him out of their world.

'How lightly we sit on your heart!' said Marguerite. 'First you take Louise from me, then you send her back. We'd all prefer to be wanted permanently.'

He would have defended himself, if the duke hadn't seen him.

'Ah, there you are, François! Have we another poem? Give us what you were reading when de Grigny interrupted, last night!'

The seigneur, whose mission was to put an end to poetry, heard his name and crossed the room.

'Are we hunting to-day, Charles?'

'Why not?'

'You haven't a boar needs killing, have you?'

'With these womenfolk along? It's too dangerous, de Grigny! Unless the ladies will amuse themselves at home while we men...'

The seigneur was firm. 'I can't enjoy hunting without the ladies. Louise has long wished to see me stick a pig.'

'Father! It never entered my head.'

'We might try for another stag,' suggested the duke. 'How are you on a horse, François?'

'Very unsteady, my lord! I'll stay here.'

'I too,' said Marguerite. 'Neither boar nor stag could get me on a horse to-day.'

When the seigneur made up his mind, he never recognized opposition. 'Louise and your poet, Charles, will ride with me. Let the stag live! We'll kill a boar.'

The duke was plainly worried. 'I'm short of good spearmen, de Grigny, and without safe men on foot, you can't ride down a boar.'

'We have our swords.'

'De Grigny! This can't be your first boar-hunt?'

'It is not,' said the seigneur. 'Get your spears ready. I expect to kill the thing with my sword.'

He followed the duke out of the room, to look the spearmen over, and his incisive voice came back still taking charge and giving advice. 'A bite of lunch, Charles, in an hour or so—then an early start...'

Master Villon, left in the window, tried to catch Louise's eye, but she avoided him, always with that defensive smile.

'I shan't ride,' said Marguerite. 'Not to-day.'

'Come upstairs with me,' said Louise. 'Father will shorten our morning for us.'

Master Villon retired to his own room, having nothing better to do. His thoughts were not of de Grigny but of Marguerite, his other danger, who might be telling now, if she hadn't already told, the blots in his history. Since the night she had loved and then tried to drown him, she had made herself familiar with the record, he was sure. She wouldn't tell about that night, but she'd bring in Margot, and Catherine—having seen Catherine, Louise would believe the rest. What else could Marguerite have found out? Not the robbery at the College of Navarre; if she had hanging evidence, she would leave Louise in peace, and blab to the provost.

Or would she? Was it only his love for Louise she wanted to spoil?

He forced himself to consider minor questions. If the

seigneur wished him to ride, he must ride. No sign of fear—match him promptly, trick for trick! And if he rode, what clothes should he wear? There would be a horse—with a swift horse under him, at some moment of the chase—and Louise would be riding within whisper-range . . .

Master Villon stripped off the silks and linen, hung them in the closet, put on his old shoes and leggings, his breeches and his jerkin, and went downstairs for that early lunch.

Louise was there, on purpose to speak with him—he could read her white face. He began, in an eager whisper . . .

'We can leave the hunt together, while the horses are fresh! It's beyond all I hoped for!'

'François—tell me the truth. Was the provost's wife . . .'

His heart sank. 'Ambroise?'

'Was she—did you once love her?'

'May she roast in hell! Marguerite, I mean!'

Louise turned away as though she would faint. When he caught her arm she pushed him off, and sank in a chair.

'It was long ago,' he pleaded lamely.

'Marguerite told me to ask if it was true.'

'You think Marguerite is your friend?'

Louise shook her head.

'It was true! It's the end, François! I forgive, and then I learn something else.'

Voices on the stairs made her stand up and put on a smile, and the company gathered for the hunt-breakfast—all but Marguerite, who, having done her work, kept to her room.

When the cavalcade rode out through the castle gates, the town-idlers were there, for another glimpse of the rich and happy. Master Villon thought how he had stood among them, only the day before. Now Louise, by her father's wish, was at his side, and the seigneur came directly behind them. Talk would have been hard, even if Louise had not been angry.

When they put the horses into a smart trot, Master Villon was bothered by his sword. The duke himself had buckled the weapon upon him. Master Villon wished he hadn't. The stiff scabbard was always getting between his

legs and the saddle, or the point of it went through the stirrup. Master Villon knew how to manage a knife, but that weapon, adequate in Paris, wouldn't serve in a forest, not against a boar. The seigneur said so, and the duke supported the opinion.

At the edge of the woods the duke and the others broke ranks, scattering among the trees to find the footmen, sent on ahead in wagons, with their spears and their dogs.

'We'll follow in good time,' called the seigneur. 'Find me a fierce boar!'

The duke and his guests pushed on, till the trees hid them.

'Rein in!' commanded the seigneur. 'I've something to say to you, Master Villon, and my daughter will hear it. No, don't stop, just slow down—I'll ride between you.'

They went the eighth of a mile before he spoke again.

'What day is this, Louise?'

'Saturday, father.'

'Correct. I wish you to remember it. On Monday, Master Villon, that fellow, what's his name, the one we caught . . .'

'Montigny, seigneur?'

'Your friend, Montigny, will hang. Monday. In the afternoon. The second hour, I believe.'

They rode in silence. Master Villon would have looked at Louise, but her father was between them.

'That other scoundrel who was trapped first—you don't by chance remember his name also?'

Master Villon knew this stripping of his character was meant for a lesson to Louise.

'Guy Tabarie, seigneur?'

'Your memory is sound. Tabarie would go to the gallows in the same cart, if he had taken heed to his health. He was a sad drinker, was he not? His muscles are rotten, like leather, and his heart stops if you say boo to him. What I should call a rat. Yet he had his friends. No accounting for taste. When we stretched him out on the rack, I give you my word, he came apart like wet paper. The provost must wait till he grows together again, or he won't be conscious of the rope.'

They rode in another silence, Master Villon measuring the distance to the seigneur's ribs. One flash of his knife, and the old man would stop licking his chops over his victims. Master Villon had never expected to be sorry that Louise was by his side.

They could hear a shouting far ahead in the woods.

'Ah—quick work!' said the seigneur. 'They found the boar! I thought well of the hounds when the duke showed me the kennels. But the huntsmen are less promising. Charles is a better judge of dogs than of human nature.'

'If we are to see it,' said Louise, 'shouldn't we ride faster?'

'Time aplenty,' said her father. 'There is still much to do.'

Master Villon, glancing at the seigneur, thought he saw a touch of madness in the face. The white beard was stately and serene, but the fierce eyes glittered with a purpose which was disturbing.

'Are you sure the boar will come towards us?' asked Louise.'

'Master Villon and I have our swords.'

'I wasn't afraid, father—I was thinking, if they drive the boar the other way, we'll never catch up.'

The seigneur rode on at his leisurely pace.

'Master Villon,' said he, 'I would test your memory again. You recall the man who tracked down these robbers for us?'

'What man, seigneur?'

'I referred to him last night—a very capable servant of the provost's who listened to Montigny and Tabarie when they were drunk.'

Master Villon made no comment.

'I thought you might recall the name,' said the seigneur, 'but the importance, of course, lies in the incident itself. This man, Master Villon, assures us that you were with your friends when he met them. He doesn't say that you were in your cups—merely that Tabarie, being sodden with wine, named you, in your presence, as the leader of the band which robbed the College of Navarre.'

The grief in Louise's eyes threw Master Villon off his guard. 'Peter Merchant is a snake!' he cried.

'You do recall his name, I see,' said the seigneur. 'You were there. The story is true.'

Master Villon pulled in his horse, and the others stopped with him. 'Seigneur, I have met Peter Merchant, but I am not on that account a thief.'

'We have the testimony of your friends.'

'Seigneur, they would not accuse me of robbing the college, nor would I accuse them. The provost is in haste to solve the crime—he depends upon the word of a spy—he will sacrifice the innocent!'

'Shall we ride on?' suggested the seigneur.

They put their horses in motion again.

'For the last few weeks,' continued the seigneur, 'the bottle has not touched your friend Tabarie's lips. We may say this much for the wretch, that he has recently been sober. His testimony concerning you, during this period, was . . .'

'Seigneur,' interrupted Master Villon, 'since I am at your service to discuss these matters when and where you choose, I regret that you embarrass your daughter and humiliate me by choosing this moment . . .'

Duke Charles came riding out of the forest looking for them.

'Why don't you follow more closely?' he called. 'It isn't safe, de Grigny!'

'We're enjoying the forest as we go,' said the seigneur. 'I assured the young people we'd be in at the death. Your men found the boar after all.'

'A big fellow,' said the duke, 'but they let the beast get away. The dogs are baffled, and if you dawdle along here, the pig may chance on you.'

The seigneur laughed.

'It's no joke, de Grigny! Suppose your daughter . . .'

'We'll join you in a moment,' said the seigneur.

'Come back with me now,' urged the duke.

'I wish you would, father,' said Louise. 'Talk with Master Villon later.'

Duke Charles glanced quickly from one face to the other, and Master Villon guessed he had ridden back for fear of something else than the wild boar.

'Don't hurry me,' said the seigneur. 'I am enjoying myself. Lead the way, Charles. We shan't keep you waiting long.'

With plain reluctance the duke wheeled around and trotted off to his other guests. The seigneur put a hand on Master Villon's bridle. 'This glade is wide enough. Louise will hold your horse for you. Get down!'

'Father! What are you doing?' cried the girl, frightened.

The seigneur dismounted from his own steed and put the reins in his daughter's unwilling hand. 'Get down, Master Villon! Step over to this smooth ground.'

Master Villon slid out of his saddle, none too gracefully. When he handed the reins to Louise, he did not look up at her.

'You're rather slow,' said the seigneur. 'I regret you have not more courage.'

Master Villon stood before him on the smooth turf with his hands in his pockets.

'Louise,' said the seigneur, 'when you permitted this rascal to kiss you, you brought disgrace to all our line. The women of our family are known for their warm hearts, but they exercise their emotions a reasonable distance above the gutter. Do me the favour to remember this Saturday. Let it be a lesson to you!'

'Father!' exclaimed the girl, with terror in her voice. The reins of the seigneur's horse had slipped from her fingers, but in her excitement she did not notice it.

'Master Villon,' said the seigneur, 'will you do me the honour to draw your sword?'

'Why should I?' asked Master Villon, groping instinctively for his knife.

'I've already explained,' said the seigneur, 'hanging is now impossible. Since my daughter has in some sort involved herself with you, the gallows might seem to touch her name. For her sake, therefore, I offer you a courteous end. On our ride together, in her presence, I have called you a thief, a liar, and a coward. Please consider that I have slapped your face. On guard, Master Villon!'

The seigneur raised his sword in the best style, but Master

Villon, with his hands once more in his pockets, turned his back and looked at Louise.

'Is it your wish,' he asked, 'that I fight your father?'

The girl was white as paper. She closed her eyes.

'If I kill him, will you marry me?'

'Draw your sword!' said the seigneur. 'Another insult from you and I'll slit your throat!'

'In any case,' said Master Villon, 'you'll probably slit it, seigneur. I know little about swords. Since I am to be dispatched with ceremony, shall we make a wager? Gentlemen do that, do they not? Suppose we say that your daughter has your consent to go home with the winner?'

Something like a smile showed under the seigneur's beard.

'Master Villon, you maintain to the last your reputation for impudence. I accept the wager. It falls in with my own plan. We quarrel, not over your crimes, but over my daughter.'

Since Master Villon could think of no further device to postpone his fate, he pulled the sword from its scabbard, saluted the seigneur, and said his prayers.

He was no swordsman at all, as Louise's father at once discovered. The old man might have finished him at a stroke, but he didn't wish his victory to seem too much like slaughter. After a pass or two he wounded Master Villon in the right arm.

'I've hurt you! Dear me!'

Louise was leaning forward, her eyes starting from her head.

'It's nothing at all,' said Master Villon. 'If you'll grant me a moment to tie my handkerchief around it...' He stuck the point of his sword in the ground and proceeded to bandage himself.

'François!' called Louise. 'Let me tie it!'

'It's done now,' said Master Villon, grasping his sword again.

'Will you kindly wipe the mud from the end of it?' said the seigneur. 'There, that's cleaner! On guard!'

The old man now was ready to strike home. His daugh-

ter's offer to help with the bandage had put him beyond trifling. With a twist of his wrist he snapped the sword out of Master Villon's hand. A shining circle in the air, and the weapon fell a foot or so beyond his reach.

Louise shrieked. 'Don't kill him, father, don't!'

'My dear,' said the seigneur, 'it was your kiss that killed him.'

He was balancing himself for the thrust at Master Villon's heart, when the boar, crashing from the bushes, made straight for the seigneur's buttocks.

'Look out!' called Master Villon. The cry saved his life. The seigneur had heard the noise behind him, yet feared a trick and didn't look round. Just as the boar reached his target, Master Villon recovered his fallen sword.

The boar drove his tusks in the seigneur's flesh, and brought him down a broken mass, at Master Villon's feet. Far more by instinct than by plan, François shoved his blade through the nearest region of the boar, which happened to contain his heart. The sword remained sticking up from the carcass.

'Seigneur,' said Master Villon, 'if you will permit me to disentangle you . . .'

'Catch that horse!' said the seigneur.

At sight of the boar all three horses had reared, and the one whose bridle Louise had dropped, was now on his way home. Master Villon had no interest in catching him.

'Seigneur, if you will permit me to pull that animal off your leg . . .'

'If you hadn't saved my life,' said the seigneur, anchored though he was, 'I would kill you now! I'll do it the next time we meet. Keep your hands away!'

'You've a sweet nature, I always saw that,' said Master Villon, 'and I admire your conceit. I didn't save your life—I saved my own. Please to observe that I have my knife in my hand. You are lying on your sword, and the boar is on top of you.'

Louise dismounted and came towards them, leading the unwilling horses.

'François!' she said. 'Find the duke! I'll wait here.'

'Your father is at my mercy. By our wager you are mine. I haven't liked the duke's hospitality. My fellow-guests are too violent. Will you ride with me?'

'No.'

He held the knife a bit ominously over the seigneur's head.

She looked him in the eye. 'You will not harm him. I will not ride with you.'

Master Villon bowed, put up his knife, and mounted his horse. 'Give my farewells to the duke. I have friends who need me more than he does.'

Then he found his way back through the woods and turned north in a hard gallop on the road to Paris.

*Brother men who shall live after us,
Be not hard-hearted when you glance our way,
For with what pity you behold our plight,
God will look on you at the Judgement Day.
Here five or six of us you see hung up.
As to our flesh which once too much we fed,
In turn it is picked at, piece by piece, and eaten,
And we, the bones, shall make a cinder-bed.
Laugh not at flakes and fragments from us shed;
But pray to God that He forgive us all.*

*Brothers whom we implore, indulge yourselves
In no disdain, though we were justly killed;
You know as well as we that many a man
Aims high but never does the thing he willed.
Pray, since the error that we did is ended,
Pray to the Son of Mary, that His grace
In the eternal doom forget us not,
Keep us from hell, grant us to see His face.
Quite dead we are, your smile is out-of-place!
Pray you to God that He forgive us all.*

*The rain has beaten down and washed us through;
The sun has dried us up and turned us black;
Ravens and crows have hollowed out our eyes,
Of beard and eyebrows left nor root nor track.
Never, not for a second, have we peace,
Hither and yon the changing wind is nimble,
And drives us round the currents of its whim,
Pecked at by birds until we're like a thimble.
Follow us not; look on our fate and tremble;
And pray to God that He forgive us all.*

*Jesus, our Prince, Who over us hast power,
From fire and torment keep us far away.
Never our steps led thither, nor our hearts!
For once there is no jest in what I say.
We pray to God that He forgive us all.*

He Sees the Last of a Friend

THE CART DREW NEAR THE CITY GATE. MASTER VILLON, comfortably flattened out on the load of straw, made himself still more inconspicuous as the farmer simultaneously encouraged his venerable horse to move faster, and entertained his passenger with talk in generous quantities.

'It's crowding the day, and I shouldn't be fetching the straw till to-morrow, but then again, a man doesn't want to miss a hanging. I thought I'd finish with the market business early, and enjoy myself this afternoon. They said the second hour, but he'll swing off about three. They're never prompt.'

Under the gate, now uncomfortably near, Master Villon could see the collectors of the market-fees, and other minor but energetic servants of the king, looking over strangers and visitors, it seemed, with unusual care. The farmer continued to make himself agreeable.

'This fellow, now, this Montigny, was wicked. Robbed a church. When they do that, I say it's going too far. They should leave the church alone. I'd be glad to tie the rope on him with my own hands.'

The cart stopped while the farmer paid his fee, then the horse strained in the traces and the wheels creaked again. Master Villon looked back at his danger, over the top of the straw, as the cart moved on. One of the officials standing in the gate caught a good view of him, showed a pleasurable surprise, and started down the street after the cart—not too fast, just keeping his distance. Master Villon recognized Peter Merchant, the provost's spy, who had caught Guy Tabarie and Montigny, and now saw his last victim in his clutches.

Master Villon flattened himself on the straw again and thought hard. His guess was that Peter Merchant would not stop the cart. He would follow till they reached the market. Just as the horse stood still, the spy would saunter up and capture his prey.

Master Villon determined not to be seized. He buried

his head in the straw till the cart began to go downhill, just before you come to Saint Benoît's. He knew that world. Within arm's reach, you might say, was Catherine. That is, if she was at home, as she probably was not. Two streets farther on, if you turned to your right, you'd find Saint Benoît's cloisters and his godfather, the chaplain, who would almost certainly be at home, Master Villon's gift for adventure coming from his mother.

He raised his head, ever so little. Peter Merchant was creeping up.

Master Villon could see the smirk on his fat face, the slightly ecclesiastical benevolence that had shown in the tavern when he was helping Guy make a fool of himself. The smile broadened now as he caught Master Villon's eye.

It seemed best to make no further investigation of the landscape—yet, unless he removed himself, Peter Merchant would overtake him in the cart before they reached the river. Master Villon unloosened his knife.

Just then the cart turned sharply to the left into the Street of the Doll, where the farmer had an old friend, a tapster who needed visiting. For that second, Master Villon calculated, they would be hidden from Peter Merchant. He went over the side of the wagon like an eel, dodged around the street-corner, doubled back in the direction from which he had just come, and kept on turning to the left till he emerged in the Street of the Serpent, only three yards or so behind Peter Merchant, who was quickening his pace, a little worried. Master Villon waited till he had followed the cart out of sight.

It was a full half-hour later, well on in the morning, when the washwoman who lived in the Célestin quarter heard a familiar knock. She opened the door without surprise.

'It's the worst day in your life, and that's the day you would choose!'

He slipped in quickly, threw his hat among the laundered things, and seated himself near her tub. 'Would you want me to stay away when Montigny was to be hanged?'

You could see she was proud of his daring, but she wouldn't encourage him. 'If there was any way to help, I'd see the sense of it. They'll catch you now, and that will be the end.'

He sat looking at the floor. 'Have you heard what Guy told?'

'It's city talk, that you were in the robbery. Were you?' He raised his eyes and looked squarely at her. 'I was.' She nodded her head. 'I knew it!'

'It was long ago, and I wouldn't do it now.'

'You mean, not since you met the girl.'

He nodded.

'Is she still perishing of love for you?'

He shook his head.

'What are you planning?'

He sat up straight, and crossed one knee over the other. 'I'll see Montigny this afternoon—if they don't catch me first—then I'll go south and stay there.'

She looked at him. 'Have you money?'

'Not a sou.'

She went over to a small box beside her account-book on the table, and took out a coin. When he felt her pressing it into his hands he looked up.

'I can't, mother. You can't spare it.'

'If it would get you away...'

He smiled. 'I know where money is, and it won't trouble my conscience to take it.'

She looked frightened, but he stroked her hand. 'I don't mean stealing.'

'Your godfather will give you nothing!'

He liked the frankness with which she now acknowledged the chaplain's place in the family. 'My father is one of those who are never well informed of their own destiny. Do you happen to know where there's a cap and a coat of a different shape from mine?'

She threw up her hands. 'How should I have a cap or coat?'

'I thought my father might have sent over a garment or two for cleaning.'

She stared at him a second, then went to a pile of things ready for the tub.

'It isn't a coat,' she said, 'just a dark shirt.'

'Better than nothing,' said Master Villon, getting into it. 'I may come back for the coat later. Now, how about the cap?'

She shook her head. 'I have none.'

'Could you change this one?'

She took out the worn feather and stretched the crown over the post of the washing-tub.

'I can't change it much.'

'It will do,' said he. 'You've made it larger. I can pull it further down on my face. . . . Well, I'll go on. What's the other news here?'

'None worth mentioning.'

'What is Margot doing? And Robin Turgis?'

'I heard one thing,' she said. 'Catherine is having a child.'

He faced her in the middle of the floor. 'Did *they* tell you that?'

'She told me herself. She wanted to know where you were. She says it's yours.'

He continued to look at his mother. 'She couldn't know so soon.'

'Why not? She says she spent the night with you in the cloisters.'

Master Villon was thinking hard. 'She came to you with that story?'

His mother wrung her hands as though to get rid of the suds. 'I heard she was talking—I sent for her.'

François walked slowly to the door, cap in hand. 'No business of mine.'

'Not if it's your child?'

He was opening the door.

'Put on your cap!' she called. 'Pull it down!'

When he stepped into the street he glanced both ways, for caution. Fifty yards off, walking towards him from the river, came Peter Merchant. The satisfied smile broadened as he recognized what was under the altered cap. Master Villon bolted up the nearest alley.

He did not show himself again till the city was making its way, two hours later, towards the gallows at Mont-faucon. Only when the sidewalks were well crowded did he come cautiously out of his cellar-door and lose himself in the stream.

He noticed that they were in a singularly happy mood. Many of the women brought along children who were too small to keep up with the mob. Some of the men gave the youngsters a lift on their shoulders. Small boys were there in large numbers, calling to each other and racing among the legs of their elders. They had evidently attended other hangings, and were connoisseurs in the art of rope-braiding. Master Villon burned with indignation, remembering who was to be hanged. He remembered also many a death-day in which, having no personal concern, he had, like his neighbours, found a holiday pleasure. Now he felt sick at heart.

Two shopkeepers were exchanging views on the severity of the law. A sentence or two came to him in the noise.

'They don't feel the same as we do. When you run the risk every day and go into it with your eyes open, you get callous.'

The other merchant wasn't so sure. 'They don't go into it with their eyes open. They never expect it will happen to them. It's like a soldier in the war—he thinks only the others will be wounded.'

The first speaker held his ground. 'This Montigny's been in the shadow of the noose before this. One time or another he's had all the terror of it. Any one of his friends might stick a knife into him down some dark street. This way he has a world looking on. They're vain fellows, all of them.'

Master Villon moved off, out of earshot, and found himself elbowing a young couple, two lovers, who apparently were attending the execution for pure sentimental diversion.

The boy was a student, as only a few years ago Master Villon had been. The girl was another Catherine, if you choose, but she had a sweet face, and for the moment

they were happy. She was fishing for a gift, a bit of velvet she envied.

'Alice wears it around her neck, but I think it's prettier on the arm. Which way would you have it?'

'At New Year's my grandmother sends me three gold pieces.'

'New Year's is a long way off,' said the girl, not disagreeably but noting a fact in nature.

'I might pick up something before then.'

'You're a dear!'

Master Villon separated himself from the amorous prattle.

In front of him were three respectable citizens who had come to the hanging, not to enjoy themselves but to support the law. They alone showed on their faces the gravity of the occasion.

'And his father,' said the first, 'was as fine a man as you could ask for—sober, God-fearing. Heaven knows what a child will come to, no matter how good the breeding.'

'He fell into bad company,' said the second.

'He should have resisted temptation! For what else was all that good bringing-up?'

The third cleared his throat. 'His judgement was unsound at the root. I hear he said there was little in a good life but dullness. His nature leaned to the vanities of this age. He was born to be hanged.'

Master Villon would have left these sober talkers, but at that moment a youth precipitated himself most awkwardly into the first speaker's stomach.

'Where are you going? Have you no eyes?' protested the victim, straightening up again. His two companions turned reproachful looks on the young nuisance.

'A thousand pardons, sir!' said the youth. 'I but lost my balance. It happens to me from time to time in a crowd—it's a lightness of the head.'

The three men watched him disappear, with further remarks on the decline of youthful morals. Meanwhile Master Villon had been observing another youth remove a purse from the pocket of the moralist whose person had borne the brunt of the collision. It was so old a trick,

wherever there were crowds, that it didn't seem a crime. Master Villon pressed forward.

When they reached the hill the cheerfulness of the crowd increased rather than diminished. The cart hadn't yet arrived, but there was the gallows with the hangman's helper fitting a fresh rope. The fellow was up astride the cross-piece, and the more witty of the bystanders called out bits of advice.

Master Villon would have been hard put to it to explain why he was there. He had no affection for Montigny, who was likelier to lead a friend into danger than into profit, and who always favoured his own skin. It would give Montigny, so far as he knew, no comfort to see an old comrade running the chance of arrest at the very gallows' foot. Loyalty in the abstract had no charms for him—he would prefer something practical, a bold rescue, a clean getaway. Master Villon was really there, as he had intimated to his mother, because it seemed cowardly not to be. Also, though this was less clear in his mind, because he wished to look on his own fate. His most likely fate. All the dreams that Louise had lighted might not save him from this.

The crowd turned their attention down the hill. The cart was arriving. At first Master Villon could see nothing over the sea of shoulders, then the grim procession mounted into view. Half a dozen armed riders, the wagon, six riders more. In the cart, behind the driver, sat Montigny on a plank, with a priest beside him. At least, Montigny should have been seated, but he staggered to his feet and tried to address the assemblage, till the bumping of the wheels put him down again.

Master Villon could not hear what he said. He had probably bribed the hangman for wine, as for certain other alleviations of the agony. The priest looked hopeless and horrified.

At the gallows the procedure was swift. The hangman's helper was still perched on the cross-piece, in case of need. The hangman went up the ladder, pulling Montigny after him, an awkward manœuvre, since the culprit's hands

were tied behind his back. Then the ladder was drawn away, and what the crowd had come to watch, began.

A body in the noose, slowly strangling, never died quietly. Feet and legs would twist in strange contortions, the tongue would stick out, a marvellous length, and if the hanged was a man, there would be a further protest of the flesh, which never failed to provoke humour or pity, according to the temperament of the spectator.

Evidently the hangman had been bribed to end Montigny's torment as quickly as possible. The approved method was to seize the legs of the gyrating wretch and pull hard on them, so producing a quick strangulation. The hangman, however, could not get a firm grasp of Montigny's agonized heels. In fact, just as he was about to seize one leg the foot struck him in the mouth, dislocating a tooth. A cheer went up from the delighted crowd.

The hangman's helper, perched on the cross-beam, now justified his precarious posture by slipping down the rope, planting a foot firmly on each of Montigny's shoulders, and jumping till all movement in the body ceased. When there was not a twitch in the limp corpse, the helper climbed up the rope again, slid down the gallows-frame, and the hanging was over. The crows began to circle near, and the crowd moved off home.

Master Villon turned away in a daze. The hours he had spent with Guy and Montigny seemed from another world. This noisy mob around him were but spectres. He walked aimlessly, keeping in motion because movement was around him.

All at once he was conscious of a satisfied smile and two leering eyes. He looked up and saw Peter Merchant almost near enough to touch. Evidently the spy was not yet ready to lay hands on him. Master Villon walked faster, as in a nightmare, conscious that the pursuing smile was only a few steps behind.

Once in the city again, he made his escape down the alleys and cellars, more familiar to him than to any treasury-agent. By back-street and courtyard he crept in safety to the wall of Saint Benoît's cloisters, where the sturdy old

vine had served him as a ladder to his attic window. To-day the vine was gone. At least, some eight feet was missing from the bottom. Someone had freshly cut it off to forestall his entry. Peter Merchant and his men were stopping all the openings of the trap.

Master Villon walked boldly around to the front-door and knocked. The chaplain unlatched an inch or two and peered out.

'Do you know who it is?' said his son. 'Let me in.'

'What do you want?' asked the chaplain, leaving a small crack.

'We'll talk of that inside. Be quick!'

The chaplain hesitated. 'You are no relative of mine!'

'If they catch me, I'll tell who's my father! The provost would like some of your gold before he hangs me!'

The door swung just wide enough, and when Master Villon had entered, the bolt went back in its place.

The chaplain's eyes showed abject fear. 'You promised never to return!'

'And I promised also to ask for no more money,' said Master Villon. 'That wasn't the last time, after all—this is. I must pay for food on the way.'

The chaplain mustered a handful of courage. 'I've given you all you'll ever get!'

Master Villon smiled at him. 'Not a large purse this time—something moderate. One or two gold pieces, a bit of silver, plenty of small change.'

The chaplain hesitated. 'How do I know you won't come back again?'

Master Villon shook his head thoughtfully. 'It's a deep problem. I may, or I may not.'

For a moment the chaplain did some hasty calculating. 'You'll go at once, if I give you a purse?'

'No,' said Master Villon. 'I'll rest in my little room up in the garret till dark falls.'

'Ah!' said the chaplain. 'I'll give you the purse just before you go.'

'Now!'

The chaplain thought a moment, then disappeared in his

office or study, then came out again with a slender bag. 'I have no more!'

Master Villon examined the contents, made a wry face, and with no further words climbed the steps to his attic room.

It was quite unchanged. Indeed, furniture so simple could hardly suffer any subtraction, unless you removed it altogether. The bed, the chair, the table. Master Villon sat on the floor, lest even at that height he might be noticed from the street. He was not usually given to sentimental reminiscences, but the fate of poor Montigny shocked him into keen remembrance.

In this room he had spent his early childhood, when he thought his godfather really was his godfather, a kind and wise person, to be revered next to God.

In this room hour after hour he had pursued the first studies of his school-days; wonderful discoveries of far-away times, long-gone heroes, witty minds. Had he continued in the path that then seemed inevitable, he might now be wearing a well-lined cassock, like the chaplain's, and girding the silken cord around a comfortable waist. Well, he didn't care to wear a cassock, and he'd rather be thin and quick on his feet.

To this room he had come home, and in it he had spent a marvellous night, shocked and thrilled, after Ambroise had discovered to his youth the mystery of love. On that bed he had stretched himself, beating the pillow and shedding salt tears, when he knew that Ambroise was to marry d'Estouteville.

At that desk he had written his first poems. It was Catherine, the wretch, who, unconscious of the golden gift, had opened for him a world of dreams and word-music. That was when he loved her truly, and thought her worth his adoration. When she proved herself far worse than Ambroise, the poetry remained, but of an acid flavour.

In this room he had returned to hide and tremble, when Montigny and Guy first taught him the art of theft. They noticed the convenience of the ancient vine, for getting in and out of the cloisters unchecked by his godfather.

He had sat here a long afternoon gazing out the window, the day he had learned his godfather was not his godfather, but the parent of his flesh and blood. He had thought it through then once for all, till he realized that the chaplain was neither good nor bad, but only timid, afraid to do wrong, and lacking courage to do right. Yet he was a dignitary of the church, a friend of the bishop, a pillar of society.

That day Master Villon said good-bye to society, into which he had never completely been born.

To that room Louise had come for love of him, and there she had met Catherine, who deliberately waylaid her that he might never find complete happiness and peace.

Well, that was life, and he had enjoyed his share in spite of all. Perhaps Montigny would say as much. In their way they had lived. There was a better way, of course, but apparently not for them, and at least they were no cowards, no shirkers, no safety-seekers. His father, the chaplain, was to be pitied on the whole, yielding up the purse from fear, giving nothing from an impulse of the heart.

Master Villon imagined the talk, when his father told the girl who was to be his mother, that he had decided to give up sinning and return to a cloistered life.

Downstairs he could hear his father now, moving about uneasily. In the kitchen Édouard, faithful old dog, was rattling pots and pans, preparing the evening supper. No doubt his father expected the fugitive in the attic to claim a meal.

Montigny's death, in a strange way, was his own. Something was finished in his life, and what came next would be quite different. He mingled Louise with these thoughts. Though he had lost her, her honest loveliness, the one purity he had ever known, reconciled him to what might befall. It would have been pleasant to win her, but even now she was his. His last thought, as he left his boyhood room, was of her.

Downstairs his father was waiting for him, just outside the study, expecting perhaps some farewell. Master Villon pulled down his hat firmly.

'Good-bye, father.'

'May God have mercy on your soul!'

It didn't seem to Master Villon the most polite formula for a parting, nor was his father exactly the person to assume those spiritual attitudes from which the heavenly pity descends, but it was no time to be critical. Master Villon slipped into the night.

He wanted to leave the city by the gate through which he had entered, since all safety lay in the south, but it wouldn't do to show himself while any twilight lingered. He would make his escape in the shadows, just before the gates were closed. Meanwhile some food would strengthen his spirits. A tavern, perhaps, crowded with strangers from the country, in for the day to enjoy the hanging, who wouldn't recognize him. He walked quickly in the general direction of the gate.

But he hadn't gone far before he knew he was followed. When he looked back he saw no one, and when he stopped to listen there was no footfall, but as he walked he felt beyond doubt a relentless pursuit.

He zigzagged from street to street to throw off the uncanny sensation, but it followed him; it even grew stronger. He told himself it was a fiction of the mind, the result of what he had seen that day, but he knew better.

Near the gate he found a tavern as he had hoped, crowded with merrymakers homeward bound. He pushed boldly into the dim smoke-laden air. At the tables were farmers with their caps on, busy over bread and cheese and wine. They were still talking of Montigny's end, comparing it with other days when the excitement lasted longer, or some accident added a zest. The general opinion was that this hanging had been finished too soon—why come so many miles for so brief a show?

In the front of the tavern there were not chairs enough, since friend liked to talk with friend, and each group stayed together, even if it meant standing about the table. There was an inner room, however, not more than an alcove, with two empty seats. Master Villon controlled his nerves and sauntered towards this seclusion. The wait-

ers did not see him. He would have called for service had he not feared that someone would recognize his voice. Better to sit there in safety for a while.

He had not been there two minutes when Peter Merchant came in with his sardonic smile, and took the chair opposite him.

'You're eating, I suppose?'

Master Villon nodded.

'You don't mind if I join you?'

Master Villon shook his head.

Peter Merchant beckoned the waiter. 'Supper for two, and a good fat bottle. Be quick!'

He leaned his elbows on the table and grinned at his victim. 'The people must have their holiday,' he said. 'To their taste a hanging is as good as a fair. What did you think of it yourself?'

Master Villon declined to answer, but his lack of manners did not disturb Peter Merchant.

'We rather thought Montigny might tell us something useful at the gallows, but he was a gentleman to the last. Besides, he was drunk.'

The waiter brought the dishes and the bottle. Peter Merchant paid for both.

'You're dining with me,' he said, filling Master Villon's glass. 'When was it we met before? How long ago it seems! Your health!'

He poured the wine down his throat with unaccustomed recklessness. Master Villon's sharp eyes saw that his face was already flushed. Peter Merchant was so sure of his prey that he had permitted himself to celebrate the victory in advance.

'No reason we shouldn't be friends,' he said. 'The fact that I have to take you to the provost, and the judge must give you to the hangman, is no reason for hard feelings, would you say? Law is law. I saw you when you came in this morning.' He filled another glass, and to encourage him, Master Villon raised the wine to his lips, but did not drink.

'Thinks I,' continued Peter Merchant, 'he'll enjoy the day better if I let him have the run of the city. I'll just

keep within sight. You're not so smart, François Villon. I was at your heels all the time.'

The wine was beginning to work, and when he filled his glass again, his hand shook. Master Villon leaned forward across the table, as though to listen more intently.

'Your friend Guy now, the one we're patching up so he can swing—you remember Guy, don't you? He's the fellow that blabbed that night I had the pleasure of meeting you. We put him on the rack, you know, and he came apart. You can't hang a man in good style when he's in pieces. Well—what was I saying?—oh—Guy told us all about you. Swore to it. You're as guilty as Montigny. François Villon, you may not know it, but you're a dead man!'

Master Villon stared at him in a friendly fashion. The waiter was somewhat near them at the moment.

'The trouble with you rascals, you know, is carelessness—carelessness.' Peter Merchant corrected the word. 'You grow reckless—reckless. Why the devil did you come here to-day? Our men are looking for you between Orleans and Tours, and never having seen you, they probably wouldn't have recognized you. Thash funny, isn't it! You had to come where you're well known! I've never seen it to fail, the murderer comes back to his crime, the thief is fashinated—fascinated—by the gallows. When I saw you this morning, riding in on that straw-cart, I just had to laugh. True as doctrine, I said, they're all alike. What I mean is—what I shtarted to say—I'll make it plain in a minute...'

His head fell forward on his arms, and the waiter was busy in another part of the room. No one saw them. Master Villon's hand was over the drunken man's mouth, and his knife was at his throat.

Peter Merchant snored.

You can't kill a sleeping man, much as you'd like to! Master Villon steadied his nerves, walked deliberately through the crowded outer room, nodded to the waiter and thanked him for an excellent meal, then opened the door, bowed courteously to his fellow-guests, and disappeared in the night.

THE COST OF LOVE

*I thought the sky a brazen dish,
A cloud, a calf-skin freshly shed;
I could not tell the dawn from dusk,
A turnip from a cabbage-head,
New wine from flat and sour beer,
A windmill from a grunting beast,
A thorn-hedge from an open gate,
A herald from a lazy priest.*

*Love stole my brains, love took me in,
And cooked me neatly on the stove.
No wits were ever yet a match,
Though tested silver-fine, for love.
You'll lose your bedding and your bed,
Your honour, your last shred of peace,
And from the goose-chase all you'll get
Is much experience chasing geese.*

He Gives a Helping Hand

MASTER VILLON WOULD HAVE PURSUED HIS TRAGIC thoughts, if fate had permitted, but there was need of a coat and of a horse, and once these conveniences were secured somewhat irregularly from a farmer who at the time was not conscious of conferring them, social complications set in.

The second day out of Paris, towards evening, hearing hoof-beats thundering up behind him, Master Villon wished he had stolen something faster. For a moment he thought the farmer must have come after his property. But it was only another traveller, like himself.

Like himself. This man was burly, with blood under the skin, whereas Master François was slender and pale. The stranger rode a strong-legged beast with fire in its eye, whereas Master Villon was forked across what usually pulled the cart because it could no longer pull the plough. The stranger had on a stout new suit, with a double seat to the breeches, and high boots of soft leather, and a velvet cap with a plume, whereas Master Villon's newly acquired jacket had a rip in one elbow and a stain down the front, and the right boot, which he hoped the stranger didn't notice, had the sole torn, from undue haste in getting over the farmer's wall, and as for his breeches, if you paid attention as he tried to keep off the plough-horse's spine, you could detect two patches on the two precise spots where the backsides first establish contact with a supporting surface.

'Good evening,' said the stranger, pulling up.

'To you,' said Master François.

'Are you bound for Tours?'

Master François made a quick review of his geography. 'Closer to Chinon,' he ventured. 'It's a small place I have between Tours and Chinon.'

'Then,' said the stranger, looking ugly, 'you're far from home and you're on the wrong road.'

'I'm stopping the night,' explained the poet, desperate, 'with a friend in this neighbourhood.'

'Now that's an ideal' said the stranger. 'Would he have room for me too?'

'If you came with me,' said Master François, getting in deeper, 'and if I knew who you were.'

'Peter Macet, at your service, bailiff for the Bishop of Orleans, and if your friend asks what I'm doing here, I'm looking for a thief, one François Villon, a spindle-shanked, pig-eyed verse-maker from Paris, with a nose on him like a fox.'

Master François turned his face away, to get the nose out of profile, then veered abruptly towards Macet, to accomplish the same result with more subtlety.

'The Bishop of Orleans!' he murmured. 'My dear Bishop Thibault!'

'You know him?'

'Old friends, thanks to his Christian charity! A poor country squire like me; but—will you forgive me for mentioning it?—though I thought I knew his household—you'll pardon the frankness—I never saw you before!'

'Perhaps,' said Macet, 'you haven't visited the palace recently. I've been with his grace three months, formerly with the Bishop of Bourges, and that's the devil of it! Old Thibault might have sent me to Blois, where this Villon had the impudence to visit the duke. Had I seen him then, I could recognize him now.'

'May I suggest that you speak of his grace with respect? Old Thibault!'

'A slip of the tongue,' said the bailiff, a bit subdued. 'No one can teach me how to respect a man of God! He hates this Villon like Beelzebub!'

Because the officer of the law was embarrassed by his slip of the tongue, there was no further talk for a hundred yards or so.

'This Villon, as you call him,' said Master François, 'must have sinned beyond what a saint can overlook.'

'He robbed a church, that's what he did!'

'Heaven keep us!' exclaimed Master François. 'Did he get away with anything of value?'

'Six hundred crowns,' said the bailiff, 'and there were

five of them, four breaking the strong-box in the chapel, and this Villon on watch outside for the police, so that would be one hundred and twenty for each, if they gave him a full share.'

'They never do,' exclaimed Master Villon with imprudent emotion. 'And there weren't five. I mean, a chapel strong-box is no place to look for wealth. To think that men will risk damnation for what would buy no more than a fine horse like yours!' The fox-like nose was pointing straight ahead, for a careless moment.

'What did you say your name was?' asked the bailiff.

'I haven't yet mentioned it,' said the poet, at his best in a tight place. 'Had you shown curiosity about it earlier, I should have been flattered, but you great folk—why should you bother with a third cousin of a run-down house?'

'Which house is that?' pressed the bailiff, with an eye on him.

'Des Loges. We're common in these parts, poor to a man! Robert des Loges—or if you wish all the baptismal names—my parents could afford this one pride—Robert Joseph Michel Saint-Jacques.'

The bailiff rode on beside him, thinking it over. 'And what's the name of this friend we're staying with?'

'If he lets you in. When I promised his hospitality, I hadn't learned who you were. He happens to be a count, and I'm not sure how he feels about a bailiff.'

Peter Macet forgot his quest for a thief. 'So proud as that, is he? When I'm eating twice a week at the bishop's table!'

'It's a powerful argument, and I'll mention it,' said Master François, 'but he wants to protect his wife.'

'Against what, in God's name?'

'Against bailiffs and all other men with muscles and personality. Among us gentry, as you've observed since you moved into Touraine, the sap of the soil gets into our women, as into our vegetables, but we men go thin and dry, with too much thought. It's paradise for foreigners. If you were only a knight, instead of a bailiff—if only at least a captain...'

'I'll let you know I'm on the bishop's business!'

'But you won't be if his wife takes a fancy to you, and if you'll accept the aid of a fellow-traveller...'

'Who said I need your aid?' roared the bailiff, concerned for his reputation. 'If you knew what good fortunes have dropped in my lap at Orleans and at Bourges...'

'Who doubts it? And the countess won't be the last! I'll introduce you as Captain Macet.'

'Just where do they live?' asked the bailiff, as though it didn't matter.

Master Villon had been dreading the question for some time, but it wasn't in him to break under a strain. 'The first castle on the right side of the road, on a pleasant hill. You see it for miles.'

He hoped to heaven there was no such place, but there was. In five minutes they glimpsed the towers. The bailiff at once showed more confidence in his companion.

'I forgot now what you said their name was.'

Master Villon had just chosen a name for them. 'Count d'Acier.'

'And there's a countess?'

'Unless something happened to her since I was here.'

'What's she like?'

Master Villon tried to be vague, since they might soon be facing the subject of his portrait. 'Rather large, yet dainty, with unusual eyes...'

'Is she one of the luscious type we were speaking of?'

'She is,' replied Master Villon, to keep him cheerful.

'What colour did you say the eyes are?'

'They change, in various lights.'

'I've seen that in grey and blue,' reflected the bailiff, 'but never in black and brown.'

Master Villon wriggled out of it. 'There's so much to admire in the woman, I haven't got around to a careful study of the eyes.'

By the time they reached the gate of the court the bailiff was genial in a vulgar way, feeding his mind on the possibilities as though he weren't accustomed to good society, but Master Villon had the weary manner of gentlefolk, as

though he'd rather stay out than go in. The bailiff reflected on the advantages of birth, and envied him. This country squire, this last twig on a withered bough, didn't give a flutter when they discovered it was the wrong castle.

'Never heard of Count d'Acier,' said the porter. A fellow crossed the yard with a bottle of wine in each hand. 'Ever hear of Count d'Acier?' The fellow hurried on. 'We never heard of him,' said the porter, summing up.

'Have I missed the road?' asked Master Villon, as though the bailiff could tell him. 'The charm of your conversation threw me off.' He turned again to the porter. 'Who does live here?'

'The Marquise de Vaire.'

'Now I know where I am! Tell her Robert des Loges has arrived, with Captain de Macet. She'll recognize the names—friends of the Bishop of Orleans.'

The porter hesitated. 'Des Loges? De Macet?'

'We'll go along with you and tell her ourselves,' said Master Villon. 'The bishop's business is pressing.'

So they dismounted and followed the porter across the court. 'Is the marquis at home?' asked Master Villon, very affable.

'The marquis,' answered the porter, 'is dead.'

Master Villon stopped in his tracks. 'What shocking news! If the house is in mourning, we won't intrude!'

'He's been dead seven years,' said the porter.

'Even so,' said Master Villon.

The bailiff was giving him queer looks when the marquise came out to the door, to ask what had descended on her.

She was beautiful. Young, and seeming younger than she was, so that you almost doubted the seven years' widowhood. Black eyes, unchangeably black, except as they might shift from curiosity to mischief, from flattering attention to downright naughtiness. You knew she'd rather smile than not, but surely on occasions she had a temper. A tall girl, olive-skinned, slender—but not meagre. She was wearing a loose gown without a kerchief, so that the bailiff, being devoid of manners, stared open-mouthed.

It was at him she glanced first. She approved, and then examined Master Villon, missing none of the rips and the spots.

'Your errand?' she demanded, as though he didn't belong to the party.

'We're the bishop's men, my dear marquise, Captain de Macet and my humble self, Robert des Loges, met by chance and craving your hospitality.'

'There's little in the house at the moment,' she reflected grudgingly, 'but I dare say we could warm up yesterday's roast. You want to stay the night, I suppose.'

'If you please, my lady.'

'Well, there are plenty of rooms. Come in.'

'One bed will serve,' protested Master Villon. 'I'm a quiet sleeper, and I dare say the captain enjoys as easy a conscience.'

It sounded to the bailiff like polite small-talk, but later he recalled with what skill the idea had been introduced. For the moment he knew he should have been constructing a hypothesis to explain the vanished Count and Countess d'Acier, but the marquise was before him, he had caught the first signals of favour, and his heart was set on progress.

'This is a noble hall,' he remarked, gazing at the ceiling, the way one does to establish a taste in architecture.

'It was better while I had a husband,' replied the marquise, as plain as that. The bailiff felt himself practically settled in the estate.

'I count it a happy accident, or a most delectable destiny, my lady, which brought me here!'

At this echo of the manners he had observed at the bishop's table she blushed, as he thought, and went off to direct the cook.

'Were you saying,' asked Master Villon with a smile, 'that I am your accident or your destiny? You certainly owe to me whatever entertainment you are about to receive.'

It was revealed to the bailiff at that moment that there was some lack of sympathy between him and his companion, and he'd rather have the marquise to himself.

'Do you really live near Chinon?' he asked, with a slight flavour of scepticism. 'You could reach home before midnight.'

'If my horse held out,' admitted Master Villon.

'Look here!' exclaimed the bailiff. 'I owe you something, but not much, after all, and I'd enjoy conversation with this woman alone.'

'Later,' said Master Villon, 'I'll arrange it.'

The bailiff drew from his breeches three gold crowns. 'Will you accept these, in token of gratitude and friendship?' Master Villon stretched out his hand.

'After dinner,' continued the bailiff. 'Will you ride on?'

Master Villon reluctantly drew his hand back. 'She expects me to stay.'

'That,' exclaimed the bailiff, 'I cannot believe!'

'I'll whisper the story in your ear, when we're in bed,' promised Master Villon. 'It's fantastic!'

You can see that the dinner that evening began in a queer temper, what with the bailiff's perplexities and irritations over Master Villon, what with Master Villon's disposition to be cheerful and friendly, which neither the bailiff nor the marquise appreciated, and what with that lady's disgust at having a quiet evening interrupted by two strangers who were palpably saving themselves the expense of an inn. She gave them soup, and the roast done over, leather-dry, and she pretended to be sorry the wine was sour. Then she put elbows on the table and studied them across the board under the candles.

'You don't look to me,' she plunged in, 'like two men who would travel together.'

She addressed this thought towards the bailiff, who raised his eyebrows and smiled, meaning that justice had been done at last.

'My lady,' said Master Villon, 'it's the first time I've heard the point made. Will you enlarge on it?'

There was an edge in his voice to startle the bailiff, had his mind been at work, but he was still busy with his smile.

'No enlarging is needed,' said the marquise. 'I speak of appearances, which may deceive but which also are all

we have to go on, so long as the body indicates the soul.'

'Actions too, my lady,' corrected Master Villon, in the hope of launching her on a philosophical flight. 'The soul is indicated not only by what we seem but by what we do.'

'Not with me it isn't!' exclaimed the marquise. 'Not when I'm concerned with a man! I've known them to act like saints, but they couldn't change their face.'

The bailiff was glancing from one to the other, trying to fathom the cause of the duel.

'The face!' Master Villon raised his hand impulsively, then let it fall on the table. 'The face is for some of us a cruel misstatement! Myself, I never draw deductions from a face unless it is handsome, like the captain's, or beautiful, like yours.'

'Sweet talk gets nowhere with me,' said the marquise firmly. 'Honest men lean to the rough side.'

'You would hint, would you, that the captain and I aren't honest?'

'The captain may be a gentleman, in spite of what he travels with, but you, I suspect, are a poet!'

Master Villon laughed heartily, to give himself time, but a quick turn was essential. The captain was staring at him. So was the marquise.

'Since we profit by your hospitality, my lady, perhaps we should tell you who we are. Have I your permission, captain?'

'I'd be glad to hear who you are,' said the bailiff, a bit dangerous.

'The bishop wishes to arrest an escaping thief, and the bailiff is well enough for small cases but not over-bright, so his grace has persuaded this gentleman, Captain de Macet, to lead the search and rouse the country-side. He enlisted me this afternoon, as I rode home towards my unambitious farm...'

'Near Chinon, did you say?' put in the bailiff.

'Near Chinon,' repeated Master Villon.

'You're telling me you rode all the way from Chinon?' demanded the marquise.

'My lady, I hope to ride much farther before I die.'

'Who's the thief?' she asked, after a slight pause.

Master Villon bowed to the bailiff. 'The captain has the details.'

'It's François Villon, my lady,' said the bailiff, clearing his throat. 'That slippery rascal has robbed a church, and the rope's waiting for him.'

'François Villon!' exclaimed the marquise. 'How odd! He came into my thought only a moment ago. I once saw the man.'

'Was it at Orleans, my lady?' he asked, with casual ease. 'The captain says he visits the duke.'

'In Paris,' said the marquise. 'He was pointed out to us as a promising young criminal. My late husband had a cousin who was a judge.'

Master Villon rode straight at the peril.

'The captain was regretting he had never seen this notorious offender. Could you tell us briefly what he looks like?'

'Like you,' said the marquise.

'Ah?' Master Villon's tone never wavered. 'My long nose?'

'Your nose.'

'My smallish eyes?'

'That's what reminded me.'

'Inclined to baldness?'

'Well,' said the marquise, 'he did have a supply of hair, and he was stouter.'

'Yet that was some years ago,' offered Master Villon, helping her out, 'and meanwhile he may have grown thin. I didn't believe—he turned confidentially to the bailiff—'there was a duplicate of my homeliness in the world!'

'I shouldn't have thought so either,' agreed the bailiff in a low tone.

'Since we're on the subject,' continued Master Villon, 'what do you make of the captain's face?'

The marquise gave the face a close inspection and the captain grew red and felt foolish.

'There's nothing criminal about it,' announced the marquise. 'A normal, satisfying face.'

'It shouldn't be normal,' said Master Villon, 'because he's extraordinary. He has adventures.'

'Why not? These are stirring times.'

'He's devastating,' continued Villon. 'He dines with the bishop, but nobody else asks him unless the woman of the house is off on a visit.'

'Oh, that's what you mean,' said the marquise, pretending it was an uninteresting subject.

'My lady,' protested the bailiff, 'this man knows me as little as I know him. We met on the road by accident.'

Master Villon laughed.

'My lady would say you are judging by appearances. The bishop asked me to keep an eye on you. He knew your keen wit would catch up with the thief if this other gift of yours didn't distract you.'

The bailiff looked startled, as though Master Villon had made a lucky hit. The marquise smiled slightly. 'There's nothing in this house to distract him!' She glanced down at where she wasn't wearing a kerchief.

'At this point,' said Master Villon suddenly, 'if I have everyone's permission, I'd like to go to bed.'

'So early?' asked the bailiff, disappointed.

'You needn't come,' said Master Villon graciously, 'but we can't be sure what we have ahead of us, and to-morrow a fresh mind will be useful.'

The bailiff had no intention of letting him out of sight. 'I suppose I should rest too, my lady, though I should have enjoyed . . .'

'So should I,' cut in the marquise, meaning nothing, but willing to show she wasn't frightened by his dangerous reputation.

'I too,' said Master Villon, giving her a sentimental look.

'You!' exclaimed the marquise. 'What are you talking about?'

'The charm of your company. Minutes will be hours till we meet again.'

'Take him to bed quickly!' said the marquise. 'I've had a room prepared for each of you.'

'Oh, one room, one bed, I insist!' cried Master Villon.

'As you will then, but don't say I didn't provide a comfortable night.'

In this remark of hers Master Villon found amusement, for he chuckled several times as he followed the bailiff upstairs.

It was a large room, and the bed was wide, with heavy curtains, and there was a chest at the foot of it, and a bench or two here and there. The bailiff took a swift survey of the locks on the doors, to be sure he could manage the bolts. Then he pulled off his boots, laid aside his coat, loosened his collar and his belt, and got into bed. Propped up on an elbow, he watched Master Villon, and at a discreet moment he removed his dagger from the belt and put it under the pillow.

Master Villon approached his rest with a different technique. First he laid his dagger on the chest, in a gesture of perfect confidence. When he climbed into bed it would be out of reach. Then he removed his garments one by one till he stood in his bare skin. Then he massaged his scalp with both hands. Then he lifted his arms in a long luxurious stretch, rising on his toes. Then he got in beside the bailiff and pulled up the blanket.

'I never saw that done before,' remarked his astonished bedfellow. 'I always sleep in my clothes.'

'So do the peasants on my humble estate,' said Master Villon, not without malice. 'But for myself, I like the feel of the sheet, when there is linen, or the tickle of wool, as on the present occasion. Moreover, I have two special reasons.'

'Which are they?'

'One is perhaps too delicate to impart, since it involves our hostess.'

'The marquise?'

'My other reason,' continued Master Villon, raising his hands lazily behind his head, and glancing across the pillow, 'my other reason—my other ...'

He paused to yawn.

'Out with it!' commanded the sheriff.

'Ah—what was I saying? Oh—I fear you think I'm François Villon.'

'I do, by God!'

Master Villon laughed.

'Behold the wisdom of the law! I thought I'd better demonstrate my easy conscience.'

'I wish I were sure!' said the bailiff.

'If you would arrest me at once,' said Master Villon, 'and take me straight to my friend the bishop, you might be doing me a great kindness.'

'How so?'

'Unfortunately, it bears upon that other reason of mine, and I ought not to involve the marquise.'

The bailiff sat up in bed. 'If you know what's good for you, you'll tell all!'

'Gently, gently,' urged Master Villon. 'It's a very personal matter—would you swear not to repeat it?'

'I'll use my discretion!'

'No gentleman could ask more. Did you notice that the marquise and I are old friends?'

'I did not! She treated you like dirt.'

'It's the same thing. The woman loves me, but she feels slighted.'

'Merciful heavens!' cried the bailiff. 'Am I losing my mind?'

'She was up to her tricks to-night,' said Master Villon, in a reminiscent tone. 'Did you observe how she tried to manoeuvre me into a separate room? I shall always be grateful to you!'

'Look here,' interrupted the bailiff, 'you thought her husband was living! You don't know her well! You never were here before!'

'The porter, like yourself, has been recently engaged. She changes her household as frequently as a bishop, but I trust for a different cause. I try to save her reputation with her servants. The last time I was here ...'

'When was that?'

'Too recently for her to forgive me. She invited me to—no, I can't bring myself to say it!'

'Go on!'

'Well, she told me her door would be open—it's the

second entrance from where we're sleeping at this minute—and after the house was thoroughly quiet—well, she'd expect me!' 'Liar!'

'Sir!'

'Braggart!'

'Oh, quite the contrary! I didn't take advantage of her generosity, not that time, but to buy her off next morning—she drew a knife on me at breakfast—I promised to stop in again some time and pay all the proper tribute. And to-night I got the houses mixed up.'

'You a lover!' sneered the bailiff.

'That's just what I'm not, I'm telling you! If I slip down the hall to-night, when all's quiet, you'll know it's a good man going to destruction only to avoid a worse fate. But come to think of it, I needn't go, not if you stand by me to-morrow at breakfast.'

His voice trailed off, his eyes closed, and the bailiff heard the rhythmic breath of slumber. Beyond belief!

Through all-but-closed eyes Master Villon saw him slide down to the end of the bed, pick the dagger off the chest, hide it with the other dagger under the pillow. Then he saw a candle brought close to his face, and knew the bailiff was checking up with the published descriptions of him. Then to his delight he watched the bailiff cautiously undressing. He wanted a glimpse of the fool making for the door in his bare hide, but there had been risks enough for one evening. When the door closed again, he permitted himself a silent laugh at the thought of the white animal feeling its way along the dark corridor, in quest of a remote ideal.

Through the remaining hours of the night Master Villon rode towards Orleans, brisk trot or gallop, on the bailiff's magnificent horse. He was wearing the bailiff's new suit, with the fine boots and the plumed hat. The landscape in those parts is of a satisfying beauty, and Master Villon's heart sang within him as the sun at dawn burned the mists away.

There is no laughter here, no joy.

What profits now the things they had,

Soft hours deep in a curtained bed,

Strong wine to turn them drunken-mad,

Round after round of feast and dance,

While always, near at hand, was death?

The pleasure, when it goes, is gone;

The blame lasts longer than the breath.

Here are those who kneeled or bowed,

Each to each, in their little span;

Here are some who were seated high,

Fear'd and served by their brother man.

All can rest now, satisfied,

Headlong into one silence brought.

No lands nor gold—and none is rich;

No teacher here—and none is taught.

He Tries to Slip Between Dangers

SINCE HE WAS WEARING THE BAILIFF'S SUIT AND RIDING the bailiff's horse, Master Villon was not eager to visit Orleans, where the bailiff served the bishop. He did not care to pass through Blois, where Louise, for all he knew, might still be visiting the duke, and her father the seigneur might be convalescing from the boar-wound, with murder in his well-bred heart. It would be prudent to pass between those two towns, leaning slightly towards Orleans, where, as he had learned from the bailiff, they hated him without knowing what he looked like.

So he found himself riding into Beaugency, through the gate called the Clock-Tower, the bailiff's horse picking up his spirits, a bit ominously, as though he recognized the place and felt at home. In fact, it was the horse rather than Master Villon that made straight for the nearest inn-yard, a busy court, with travellers going and coming, and pedlars with their wares trying to skim a little business off an unwilling world. In one corner three jugglers, two men and a woman, balanced knives, turned hand-springs and stood upside-down, for the pleasure of gaping stable-boys. Master Villon persuaded the horse to step on where he could see them better.

Another mounted man promptly moved to his elbow. Master Villon looked him over thoroughly and swiftly, as you will when your life is at stake.

A pleasant-faced person, dressed like a merchant or a lawyer, Master Villon couldn't decide which. Genuinely interested in the jugglers, as though they were something new and strange. Mounted on a horse almost as good as the bailiff's, but not so well cared for. Master Villon breathed freely.

'The same old tricks.'

The man turned to him a happy smile. 'But well done! I rarely have a chance to see them. Such artists as these don't come our way.'

'What way is that?'

'Saint-Maixent—just below Poitiers.'

'You're far from home,' said Master Villon.

'I start back in an hour,' said the man. 'It's a yearly holiday with me—I'd suffocate if I didn't get out and see the world.'

The jugglers were finishing their act, but Master Villon didn't notice. He was occupied with an idea.

'That's a fine horse you have!' he began.

'Nothing in comparison with yours,' said the traveller from Saint-Maixent. 'I've cast an envious eye on him. You wouldn't care to sell, would you?'

Master Villon puckered his lips. 'I haven't thought of it.'

'An exchange—say—my horse for yours, with some gold thrown in—a reasonable amount?'

Master Villon left the subject as though it didn't interest him in the least: 'You are a notary, perhaps?'

'Apothecary, nothing better than that,' said the man cheerfully. 'But my son may follow the law. A smart child, if I do say it, and only two years old!'

Master Villon smiled inscrutably as he slipped off his saddle and led his horse to a hitching-post. 'We'll meet again if you're not leaving for an hour. Business claims me now.'

The apothecary moved on good-naturedly, and Master Villon turned as if by accident just as the jugglers were going into the servants' quarters of the inn. The men were hurrying ahead, the woman was lingering. When she saw Master Villon's eye on her she smiled and came boldly over to him.

She wasn't beautiful nor pretty, and at the moment she wasn't particularly clean, but she had the charm of health and impudence. Master Villon was at home with the type. Dressed for her performance, in slippers, shirt and trousers, she was more feminine than she would have seemed in women's clothes. The costume gave her licence to display her trim body. Master Villon knew the reason for her presence in the little troupe. Her companions would not interrupt if she could fascinate a man in the audience.

'That's a good show,' said he.

She laughed. 'Did you like the show, or did you like me? Because the show's no good.'

'We understand each other,' said he. 'The show was vile. I like you.'

'You're a sweet thing! I knew it the moment you rode up!'

'I'm staying here till to-morrow,' said he, slipping a silver coin into her hand.

'Oh, that's all right then! I thought you might be riding on after lunch.'

A hostler was sauntering towards them, and for various reasons Master Villon thought the talk should come to an end.

'Perhaps we may eat together at noon,' said he, waving a hand.

She ran off to change her costume, and he gave his attention to the hostler, who was patting the horse on nose and shoulder. The animal was evidently pleased.

'No finer mount this side of Paris,' said the man.

'You two are old friends,' said Master Villon, putting it that way to seem familiar with the animal's history, no matter how the facts turned out.

'Old friends? I should say! I helped break him in. The Bishop of Orleans bought him of us for his new bailiff. You aren't the bailiff yourself, are you?'

'His assistant,' said Master Villon, with great promptness.

The hostler seemed to find it easy to believe.

Master Villon slipped him a small coin.

'Look after the beast for me, will you? I've an errand at the Town Hall; then I'll want a bit of food before I ride back.'

He needed a few moments to himself, and a walk through the town was as good a device as any. It wasn't simply that the hostler had recognized the horse; an even worse danger might spring up from unsuspected quarters. The inn which you might think was the most dangerous place was probably a safe spot, for the present, as long as they continued to believe he was the bailiff's man.

What bothered him was the fine horse and the fine clothes. The bailiff had large feet, and the boots didn't fit. Someone might notice how he shook in them as he walked. The trousers and the coat were too wide for him, the hat slightly too small.

It would have been easy to ride out of the inn-yard through the Clock-Tower and off on the road again, but he'd better get rid of the horse and the clothes before the bailiff caught up with him. The horse, perhaps, could be sold to the apothecary—that is, if the apothecary was a firm character and faithful to his admirations. So far as the clothes were concerned, Master Villon saw the dim thread of an idea. That's why he had spoken to the woman. But it wasn't as yet a very clear trail.

When he mentioned the Town Hall, he didn't know how near that official building was, fairly around the corner from the inn. He came on it before his meditations were well started. The building didn't attract his attention so much as the crowd around the door.

When Master Villon saw what the crowd were looking at, he took off his hat and coat and carried them on his arm, where they couldn't easily be noticed. On the steps of the Town Hall the bailiff was expostulating with some minor officials who evidently thought him not a proper person to enter such a respectable building.

One of his eyes was blacked. Master Villon realized with delight that the bailiff's love-making had not been successful. He wore no coat, Master Villon's being, in fact, too small for him. The breeches too were to say the least tight, but the bailiff had to wear something, and he had let out the laces as far as they would go. To a post at the gutter he had just hitched Master Villon's stolen farm-horse. He was a very angry man, conscious of injustice.

Master Villon would have liked to enter the Town Hall with the others, and hear what sort of tale the bailiff would invent to cover his plight, but prudence suggested a speedy retreat to the inn.

On the way he got into hat and coat again, and he lost no time in looking up the apothecary.

'It was a pleasure to meet you,' he said, 'and if you really want my horse . . .'

'The horse is well enough,' said the apothecary, seeing that the bargaining must now begin, 'but my own has served me well, and perhaps I'd better keep him.'

'Good judgement,' said Master Villon. 'One shouldn't part with a faithful animal. I'd rather not sell either.'

The apothecary looked disappointed. 'The only thing is the question of age. My horse is getting on, and yours is quite young.'

'I noticed that,' said Master Villon. 'That's why I thought you were going to throw in a gold piece or two, to make it even.'

The apothecary saw his mistake. 'Let's get down to facts. How old *is* your steed? Mine is hardly into middle age.'

Master Villon looked around the inn-yard. The hostler who had been paid to look after the horse was nowhere to be seen.

'Do you want the beast?' he said.

'I'll trade horse for horse,' said the apothecary.

'Your horse and two gold pieces,' said Master Villon, thoughtful of the bailiff and the flight of time.

'One gold piece,' said the apothecary, expecting to make it one and a half.

'One gold piece it is,' said Master Villon. 'You're not riding now, are you? I'll help you mount and see you off.'

'If ever you come to Saint-Maixent, let me see you,' said the apothecary, delighted with his bargain. 'The name is Dubois—Henri Dubois. Anybody can tell you where I live.'

Master Villon watched him out of the inn-yard, then went to look for the woman.

He found her midway in her dressing, in a remote corner of the stable, with a bucket of water for a bath, under the large hay-mow, which served her and her fellow-juglers for a bed.

'There you are!' said she, unembarrassed to be found at her ablutions. 'I haven't been so clean for a year—all on account of you. How about that meal you promised? I'm hungry!'

Master Villon arranged a few armfuls of hay to sit on, conveying a sense of unpressed leisure which was not his.

'There's a chicken in the pot,' said he. 'We'll eat on the quarter-hour.'

'I count on you for to-night,' said she, with a smile that was anything but coy.

He laughed, and she looked up in surprise.

'I count on to-night myself,' said he quickly, as though to reassure her, 'but you reminded me of a friend.'

'Oh, I did!' said she, not appeased.

'He's a terrible man for love,' said Master Villon. 'Once aroused, he'll stop at nothing.'

'Maybe he's the one I'm looking for, not you,' said the woman.

'I was dining in a fine house, a few nights ago,' said Master Villon, ignoring her tone, 'and he was there, and the lady who was giving the dinner asked us to stay the night—which we did.'

'And what's that to laugh at?'

There was a noise in the inn-yard, and Master Villon took the precaution to look out, but it was only a departing traveller. He sat down again on the hay. The woman was practically dressed.

'What made me laugh,' said he, 'was the way she wanted to give us two rooms, and he insisted on sharing one bed.'

'With you?'

'With me.'

'That *is* funny!'

'I haven't yet got to the point,' said Master Villon, with great patience. 'He was dying of love for her, and he thought *I* was, so he wished one room in order to keep an eye on me. I pretended to fall asleep, and he, if you will believe it, slipped out of his clothes and down the hall to her door.'

'That man had energy,' said the woman. 'I like him.'

'It's not known yet,' said Master Villon, 'whether she shares your admiration. I should think he was taking a risk.'

'What did he say when he came back?'

'I didn't wait. After all, it was a shabby trick, supposing I had cared for her. I put on his clothes and rode away.'

For illustration Master Villon wiggled his toes in the immense boots and held out the sides of the copious breeches.

'You stole his clothes?' The woman looked frightened.

'As I have just told you,' said Master Villon. 'When he comes home I'll give them back to him. It won't disturb our friendship.'

Plainly the woman was puzzled by the story, being too shrewd not to suspect a purpose. She had brown eyes, like Louise, and a clear mind, and she would have been honest had it been practical. Master Villon liked her without exaggerating her good points.

'Would you accept this gold piece?' he asked, taking out of his pocket what the apothecary had given him.

'Is it for to-night?' she inquired, just to keep her accounts straight.

'We'll deal with to-night when it comes. This is a token of disinterested love.' She laughed as she accepted the coin.

'One of those men who perform with you is about my size.'

'You mean the thin one,' said she.

'Is he here at the moment?'

She laughed again. 'After they changed their clothes they both went to the Town Hall, to see what the confusion was about.'

'Confusion?'

'There was a drunken fellow in his shirt, with a black eye, calling for justice.'

'On whom?'

'I told you, he was drunk.'

She brushed her skirt with her hand. 'Where's that quarter-hour? I'm hungry!'

'As soon as your men return—they'll want to eat too.'

Her eyebrows went up. 'I thought I was invited! Was it the troupe?'

'Please yourself,' said he. 'I meant to show courtesy to your friends. This evening we can dine alone.'

'They'll probably be late,' said she, in a sulk. 'I'm not to get any food at all.'

'They change their clothes!' reflected Master Villon out loud. 'Yours is a prosperous profession. Few men have more than one suit.'

'Oh, it's just the old things we wear when we do our act—slippers, breeches, shirt.'

Master Villon followed her glance to the top of the hay-mow, and understood that the performing-costumes were stored away there. She had told him what he wanted to know.

'What town are you going to next?'

'We're on the way to Orleans,' she said, 'but we'll stop a day or two in Meung, if business is . . .'

With that the two men came back from the Town Hall.

'Hello!' said the thin one, whose height was much like Master Villon's.

'He's the traveller who watched us this morning,' said the woman, explaining the stranger she was talking to, 'and he asks us to eat with him.'

The thin juggler looked pleased, then worried. 'The innkeeper told us to stay on the outside of his house. We get no further than the stable.'

'I'm starved,' said Master Villon, rising to his feet, and picking the hay out of his boots. 'We've waited for you this half-hour, and there's no time to lose.'

The smaller juggler, not the thin one, turned to the woman and laughed. 'Suzanne, the crazy fellow in the shirt says he's bailiff to the Bishop of Orleans!'

'What did they do to him?' she asked casually.

Master Villon, who was already leading the way to the inn, listened with close attention.

'Oh,' said the man, as though it were an unimportant detail, 'the constables have him till they can send to Orleans and find out who he is.'

'Just pause at the door,' said Master Villon, 'and I'll speak to the innkeeper, whom I've always found, with the proper approach, broad-minded.'

He stepped inside the taproom and removed his hat.

The waiter stared at him, then, seeing his good clothes, offered an empty stretch of bench at the end of the one long table. The other guests, without interrupting their meal, looked on.

'The innkeeper,' said Master Villon, with a grand air. 'I would have a word with him.'

The waiter, much impressed, made off through the kitchen door. Master Villon, turning his back on the curious table, looked out the window.

It was his first chance to collect his thoughts, since he had made the error of entering the town. He was now free of the bailiff, at least for a time. But it would still be wise to disengage himself completely from that episode. He was glad the apothecary had taken the horse. As for the trick he had played on the bailiff, he had no regrets—the man had hunted him down, he was only saving his life if he could.

What bothered him was the deception he was plotting at the expense of these strolling acrobats, who had done him no harm. For him it was necessary to escape, but the consequences to them might not be agreeable.

The innkeeper was coming from the kitchen, a stout man, efficient but overheated, wiping his hands on the apron about his waist.

'Monsieur?'

'I wish food for myself and three friends.'

'But why not, monsieur?' The innkeeper began to arrange the places at the table.

'I wish to speak about my guests. They are the jugglers who entertained us this morning in your yard.'

'Ah! So!' The innkeeper put a hand to his chin. 'Monsieur, the jugglers usually eat with the servants.'

'I've a special reason,' said Master Villon. 'The Provost of Meung sent me—I work for him.'

'Ah, yes,' said the innkeeper. 'The hostler spoke to me about it. I thought he said Orleans.'

'Meung,' said the Master Villon. 'I must have a word with these people—if possible I'd like to get them in good humour.'

The innkeeper looked doubtfully at his long board, where the guests were well-bred and might not care to eat with jugglers.

'Monsieur, shall I bring you in a small table, by the window?'

'At once!' said Master Villon. 'Give us a fat chicken and a bottle of wine. I'll fetch my friends.'

When they were seated, with the woman next to him, and the folk at the main table were going back to their food again, Master Villon took off his coat and folded it, lining out, over the back of the chair, where his hat was already hanging.

'I'm hot in here—it's the kitchen so close. Well, what did the crazy man say for himself, at the Town Hall?'

The thin juggler, made affable by the unexpected hospitality, rested his elbows on the table. 'He claimed he was a bailiff, on the look-out for François Villon, that Paris dare-devil, and he actually met him on the road and didn't recognize him at first, till Villon took away first his horse and then his clothes.'

Master Villon laughed. 'He must be a clever fellow to take the clothes off a bailiff on the highway. I can't believe that story.'

He was conscious that the woman listened with a strange alertness, from the moment his name was mentioned. He avoided meeting her eyes.

'The judge didn't believe it either,' said the thin juggler. 'He said Villon was only human, and even so, the tales about him are impossible. No man's as clever as all that.'

The second juggler contributed his wisdom. 'He's a Paris type. You wouldn't find him down here in the country.'

Master Villon considered the case carefully. 'I often wonder if there really is such a person! Wherever I go, I hear of him, but as the judge says, the stories are not convincing.'

He knew that the woman was still watching him. It was a severe test of his nerve. If she should get up suddenly, in that room, and denounce him...

The innkeeper brought in the chicken and the wine.

'Ah, this is indeed service!' said Master Villon. 'Speed

and quality both! I drink to the prosperity of the house!

The innkeeper acknowledged the good wishes with a smile and a bow. 'Will there be anything else, monsieur?'

'Later,' said Master Villon. 'One flavour at a time!'

He was glad that the chicken diverted the woman's steady gaze, hunger exceeding all other curiosities. Having need of food himself, he fed comfortably on the meat before he pushed his chair back and got to his feet. 'If you'll mind my coat for me,' he said, 'I'll just step out for a moment and see how the horse is getting on.'

'I'll go with you,' said the woman.

'Oh, I couldn't think of it,' said Master Villon, taking care not to look at her and striding towards the door. 'Go right on with the meal.'

But Suzanne was after him like a shadow. Just outside the inn he turned in desperation. 'I told you not to come! I'll be back in a minute.'

There was irony, not unkind, in her gaze. 'No—you won't come back! I guessed who you are, but it's all right. I'll pay for the chicken out of the gold piece. Shall I see you again?'

He thanked her with a smile. 'You'll go in quickly, won't you? Before the men come looking for you?'

She blew him a kiss, and went back to the table. Master Villon proceeded deliberately to the stable-door, but once inside he scrambled up the hay-mow, got out of his boots and breeches, put on the thin man's slippers and tumbling-costume, and picked out the horse which, as nearly as he remembered, had belonged to the apothecary. Then he rode quietly across the inn-yard, thankful that the taproom window faced the other way.

Once out on the street he decided not to issue by the Clock-Tower. Someone might remember his more splendid state when he rode in. He chose, rather, a winding course avoiding the Town Hall and other points of danger, hoping to find a gate where they had never seen him before.

There were few people on the streets, the town being occupied with its midday repast. He wanted to spur the animal—to put a distance between him and his guests at

the inn—also to find out what speed there was in the apothecary's mount—also to be well out of danger in case this horse hadn't belonged to the apothecary. But wild flight he knew would rouse suspicion, and he must be discreet till he was beyond the wall.

He had no idea so small a town could take so long to pass through! The sweat was already standing on his forehead when a turn of the street gave him sight of a fine broad gate, wide-open, and a road beyond leading forth into a free country.

Also, the turn of the street brought him on a small crowd following two constables who had the bailiff man-crowded between them.

Master Villon did not recognize the danger till it was too late. The bailiff looked up from his griefs.

'There he is now!' he cried. 'That's the man! He stole my clothes and my horse!'

The curious crowd laughed, the constables looked around, and Master Villon reined in.

'What's this?' he asked, with as easy a manner as he could summon.

'Where are my horse and my clothes?'

'Is this the horse you speak of?' said Master Villon.

'You know well it is not!' cried the bailiff. 'I wouldn't ride such a bag of bones!'

'And I suppose these are your clothes?'

'They are not!'

The crowd laughed again, and the constables joined in the merriment. One of them put his finger to his forehead to show where the bailiff was weak.

'My poor fellow,' said Master Villon, 'I don't seem to be the person you're looking for.'

'But you are!' cried the bailiff, struggling with his captors. 'You're the very one, and none other! You are François Villon, the rascal the bishop is looking for!'

'François Villon!' echoed the constable, glancing at the other.

'I should have been more flattered,' said Master Villon, 'if you had mistaken me for the bishop himself. From all

I have heard, François Villon is an unsteady character.'
'Come back with me to the Town Hall!' cried the bailiff. 'I'll prove it!'

'Sorry,' said Master Villon, 'I have work to do and the afternoon is getting on.'

He stuck his heel in the horse's side, and the beast was already moving off when he noticed the constables were conferring. They leaned their heads together, with their eyes on him, as though recognizing something familiar in his black eyes and sharp nose.

Master Villon reined in once more. 'Would you like me to go back with you to the judge?' he asked with a smile.

The constables looked embarrassed. 'You *do* look a little bit like the Paris thief,' said one apologetically.

'I don't care for that sort of reputation,' said Master Villon with great dignity. 'If you'll come with me before the magistrate, I have some charges of my own to make.'

'It's a natural error,' said the constable, 'and you shouldn't hold it against me. I meant no insult.'

'Another man might misinterpret what you said.'

This time Master Villon got his horse in motion, taking care not to seem too much in a hurry. He could hear the expostulations of the bailiff, but he didn't turn around.

Just as he was passing under the gate he heard a shout, and giving a hasty glance over his shoulder he saw the hostler, the one who recognized the bailiff's horse, running up to the constables, who paused with the prisoner. Master Villon did not linger. He put the apothecary's horse into a hard gallop.

It was a fine sunny afternoon, and the clear air tingled pleasantly on his cheeks. He bent low over the horse's neck, and wished the highway would curve so that he could slip from sight. His mount was no paragon of speed—already the beast was breathing hard.

The town gate was far behind him now, but he thought someone called his name, and with unpleasant distinctness he heard the hoof-beats of running horses, not one but several.

He worked his heels frantically, and prayed for a side-road or a bushy lane. The hoof-beats came nearer.

TRIBUTE TO MEUNG

*Thanks to that bishop, Jacques Thibault,
Prisoned with irons on my feet
I had much water for my drink,
Much bread of anguish for my meat.
Now when the thought of it returns
I say a prayer for him—God lay
The whip of justice to his hide
And never take the lash away!*

*Don't think I underrate the man;
He and the fellows he commands
Address them to their daily task
With smiling eyes and willing hands.
Robert the Hangman most of all,
Bone-breaker, muscle-rearranger!
Christ said to love, and so I do,
The way He loved a money-changer.*

He Calls for Justice

JUST BEFORE THE MOUNTED MEN FROM BEAUGENCY caught up with him, Master Villon took advantage of a dip in the landscape, slid off his frightened horse, at the risk of his neck, and fell face-down in the long grasses of the roadside ditch. It was a satisfaction to hear his pursuers thundering past.

Beyond the ditch there was a hedge with a break in it. He wriggled through, hastily repairing the opening he had widened, and stretched out again. The hoof-beats faded in the distance, then stopped. He knew they had overtaken his horse or caught sight of the riderless animal. In a moment they came back at a sharp trot. If his feet had marked the dust in the highway, he was as good as hanged! But they missed the trail and rode on.

His impulse was to rise and run, but he knew better. He must travel on foot now, and in that open country, with its clean autumn fields, a man could be seen for miles. He would choose the lesser risk and lie quiet.

Not till complete darkness had settled for an hour or so did he try his stiff legs again on the road. Through the night he continued walking, with his ear tuned for a hoof or a wheel or a human foot. When the rare traveller appeared, it was easy to drop into the ditch again.

At dawn, what with walking and hunger, his head was none of the clearest. On the horizon, ever so far away, he believed he saw a town. It seemed to be in front of him. Was it Beaugency? Had he, in a confused moment, risen from the ditch and retraced his steps? Much as he disliked to attract attention, he would speak to the first safe-looking wayfarer, and get his bearings.

No sooner had he committed himself to that plan than a cart overtook him with three men in it, all of respectable demeanour, and one of them, a small man, more than respectable, positively benign. His face held the constant promise of a smile.

The cart stopped almost before Master Villon signalled.

'What town is that—Beaugency?'

The benign man laughed. 'You don't want to see Beaugency again, do you?'

Master Villon was too weary to be careful. 'God knows I don't!'

This time all the men in the cart laughed, and Master Villon tried to think of a reason why their spirits should be so high at an hour so early.

'Get in—plenty of room,' said the benign person, pointing to the half of the plank which the driver didn't cover.

Master Villon climbed up. 'What town is it, then?'

He was aware of an ominous silence, and was turning, to defend himself, when the man who had seemed benign hit him over the head with an axe-handle.

Master Villon woke up in a damp room, without windows. There was an iron grating for a door. He didn't recognize the place. His head ached. He couldn't tell what hour of the day it was. He didn't care. It must be day, for there was a dim light in the corridor outside the grating.

His bones ached, perhaps from the beating he had received, perhaps from the hard bed on which they had dropped him—a raised plank, when he came to examine it, not long enough for his feet. When he lay still he could hear soft scamperings in the cell-corners. The rats were ready for him.

Against his will he fell asleep again or fainted. When he woke it was because a lantern-light swung across his closed lids. He sat up and reached for his knife. A short laugh mocked him.

'Little Robert never leaves you that! Here's your breakfast.'

On the dirty floor by the plank was a mug of water. Also a crust of disreputable bread.

'I should like to see Little Robert!' exclaimed Master Villon.

'You've seen him—he brought you in.' The swing of the departing lantern threw a sickly gleam on an uninviting face—cropped hair, small eyes, thick jaw.

'You can't put me off,' said Master Villon, restraining

himself with dignity. 'Just wait till the Duke of Orleans hears of this!'

'I'll wait,' said the jailer, taking his lantern through the grating and fastening the lock.

'Come back! Let me speak with Little Robert! There's a mistake!'

But the fellow was gone, and the prompt rats were closing in on the bread-crust. Master Villon kicked it towards the grating. When it struck the iron and fell to the ground he could see the quick black shadows piling over each other to get at it.

Before the jailer came back with the next meal, however, he realized he should have eaten the bread himself. He was very hungry. When the crop-headed fellow put down another crust, Master Villon picked it up with a speed he tried to control.

'That's better,' remarked the jailer. 'The second time around they're usually reasonable.'

Master Villon munched the crust and kept his temper. 'Who's in charge of this place?' he inquired.

'Well,' said the jailer, 'in a sense I am.'

'I thought it was Little Robert.'

'Well—I take orders from him.'

'Why won't he speak with me?'

'All in good season,' said the jailer, turning towards the corridor. 'He always has a word with them, at the end.'

The lantern retreated further.

'If you have no urgent engagements,' said Master Villon, 'I'd be glad of your company a while longer. Naturally a stranger's curiosity is roused by this harping on Little Robert. Who is he?'

The man put the lantern on the ground, for greater ease with the lock. When it was fastened he peered through the grating.

'As though you didn't know!'

'My ignorance is complete.'

'Well,' said the jailer, picking up the light, 'he's the bishop's hangman.'

For tedious hours, when the corridor grew dark, Master

Villon paced back and forth beside his plank, or for rest sat down and moved his ankles, to scare off the rats. He had plenty to think of. Was he feeling the bailiff's wrath, or was Peter Merchant still on the scent? The hangman! What hangman? And a bishop's hangman. What bishop?

Master Villon reviewed his case from every angle, and reviewed it again, with a tendency towards repetition, such as hunger and a slight fever induce in an aching skull. He had thought himself into a maudlin tangle by the time a swaying and increasing light outside the grating announced the jailer again.

More bread and water. But now the man wanted to talk.

'We've a new king.'

'Have we?' said Master Villon, thinking the subject remote.

'The old one, Charles, died a week ago. Little Robert just told us. Good riddance, I say. Charles had no character.'

'That's a sad fault,' said Master Villon.

'They say the new one's a terror,' continued the jailer, meaning praise.

'Have I heard of him before?' said Master Villon, to whom experience had brought no proof that the son succeeds the father.

'Prince Louis—the title will be Louis the Eleventh. He'll keep order for you! He can do without a judge, but he loves a hangman.'

Master Villon reflected in passing that the jailer made a point of turning your thoughts to the gallows. There were pleasanter themes.

'Does he love bishops too?'

'Hein?'

'Is this Louis fond of the bishop who employs Little Robert?'

'That's Thibault of Orleans.'

'Ah, then I'm in Orleans!'

'You're in Meung,' said the jailer, getting back to richer veins of thought. 'Thibault and Louis, now, are two of a kind. Order comes first with his grace, and there's nothing

second. The last time he was here he said to Little Robert—Robert, said he, give them the choice between two straight things, the path of virtue and the rope.’

Master Villon did not comment on this simplified approach to sainthood. The jailer moved off reluctantly, leaving another fragment of praise for the bishop.

‘He likes Little Robert to get the truth out of a rascal by the shortest method. Robert, he said, where there is ground for suspicion, probe to the quick. Our Heavenly Father desires results.’

Master Villon held his tongue, and the jailer locked the grating.

‘I wish to appeal to the bishop,’ called Master Villon as the light was departing. ‘If you could carry a message to him . . .’

The jailer paused in the corridor. ‘The bishop’s a busy man, preaching the gospel and visiting the churches and blessing the sick and the poor. He may be present, but he told Little Robert not to count on him—in case duty holds him at Orleans.’

‘Be present when?’ called Master Villon, thoroughly roused, but the lantern was swinging up the corridor and there was no answer.

The next time the jailer came he was not disposed to talk. He merely grunted when spoken to. Master Villon wondered if the change were accidental. Perhaps Little Robert and the bishop liked to break down the mind before they began to torture the body. That the body would suffer more pains than the scaffold provided, Master Villon had no doubt.

For a full week of days and nights the jailer continued his silent ministrations, with occasional accessions of humane pity which did not deceive his victim. When Master Villon complained, for example, that life could not be sustained indefinitely on bread and water, there was at once an improvement in the fare—a bowl of gruel now and then, even a piece of meat. All this served by the jailer without a single word.

Or when Master Villon suggested that unless the nightly

maraudings of the rats were somehow curbed, there might be no piece of his carcass left for Little Robert to work on, the jailer, preserving his stubborn silence, brought to the cell a large and ferocious cat. There were no more rats, but Master Villon stayed awake to be sure what the cat might have in mind.

He was not surprised when the jailer at last beckoned him out into the corridor. Two extra guards were waiting to escort him, one of whom he recognized as the driver of the cart, that unlucky morning. They told him merely to walk straight ahead, but even without further instructions he knew where he was going.

At the end of the corridor the small procession descended steep stairs, and came out in the torture-room. Three or four lanterns supplied what light there was. Little Robert, the benign man of the cart, stood beside a table on which a candle sputtered. A thin-faced clerk had his quill ready and his horn of ink, under the candle. The chamber was furnished with several ominous machines which took Master Villon’s thoughts back to the hour when the Provost of Paris examined Michel the tailor, and he himself had a turn on the rack.

There were also several buckets of water, the use of which he understood.

His only surprise came from a short figure standing in the back of the room, guarded by the third of those who had met him in the cart. The short figure was Suzanne, the tumbler whom he had left with her juggling companions at the inn in Beaugency.

The sight made him find his tongue.

‘Master Robert,’ he said in a firm voice, ‘I appeal to you to set right a mistake of your servants. I am an entirely innocent man!’

‘That,’ said Little Robert, smiling cordially, ‘is what we shall now find out.’

‘What am I accused of?’

Little Robert’s smile broadened. ‘You expect me to give away the case in advance?’

Master Villon was losing his temper. ‘I appeal to you

for justice, or to the bishop, if you don't know what justice is! Or to the king!

'Very well,' said Little Robert to the clerk, 'we'll let him stand aside, and we'll question the woman.'

Master Villon raised his hand. 'I swear she had nothing to do with it!'

At these words the thin-faced clerk looked up sharply, and Little Robert broke into his merry laugh. 'You speak too hastily, François Villon. She had nothing to do with what? You see? You *do* know the accusation!'

'I do not! I know only that the woman is concerned with nothing in my conduct, either good or bad!'

'So? I thought you had an eye, and good taste.'

At this remark Master Villon cast a quick glance towards Suzanne. She still had on her tumbler's costume, the breeches and the tight-fitting jacket. She looked pale, but otherwise showed no sign of fear. In her life, conflict with the law was nothing new. She stared at Master Villon as though they had never met before.

His glance went back to Little Robert. 'I should prefer to have my case tried separately.'

The bishop's executioner resented this resort to legal strategy. His smile disappeared. 'Prepare them both,' he said. 'The questioning can be double.'

In a minute the guards had removed Master Villon's upper garments, and bent him back upon the table-like machine which he had recognized when he entered the room. His legs from the knees down were bound to the posts which held the table up at one end, and his arms were bound to the supporting posts at the other end, so that the half-naked body arched most uncomfortably, and the head with nothing to lean on drooped towards the floor. When the guards had him ready for the questioning they unfastened his breeches at the waist, to give the stomach room to stretch itself.

'Now the woman,' said Little Robert.

They took off Suzanne's shirt, and bent and bound her to the other machine by Master Villon's side.

Little Robert turned to the thin-faced clerk. 'Begin!'

The clerk held a document to the candle and cleared his throat. 'The woman Suzanne, arrested while most impudently giving an acrobatic performance with two male accomplices in the very shadow of the Meung jail. The men caught sight of the constables, took to flight, and are still at large. The woman Suzanne would doubtless have seen her danger and fled with them, had she not been walking on her hands, upside-down.'

'Fewer words!' said Little Robert. 'Give us the heart of it!' The clerk ran his finger down the page.

'The woman Suzanne was seen whispering with the aforesaid François Villon in the stable of an inn. She was further seen with her two male accomplices dining at the same inn. As to whether François Villon was with her, the testimony conflicts.'

'Was that the Beaugency inn?' asked Little Robert, annoyed at any difference of opinion.

The clerk examined the text. 'It was.'

'Then say so. François Villon, did this woman in any way assist or aid you, or was she present, when you robbed the College of Navarre?'

So much blood had run to Master Villon's face, he was a rich purple as he twisted his neck to look the hangman in the eye. 'I didn't rob the College of Navarre! Whoever was there, I wasn't!'

Little Robert smiled, then directed his gaze to the other machine where the smaller and, to tell truth, more shapely form was spread.

'Er—what's her name?'

The clerk fumbled with his papers. 'The woman's name? Oh! Suzanne.'

'Suzanne,' said Little Robert, 'tell us what you know of the robbery at the College of Navarre?'

The blood was in Suzanne's face too, but she did not trouble to turn her head as she answered. 'I never was in a college—not Navarre nor any other.'

Little Robert glanced towards the guards. 'A good pint, to start with!'

Master Villon's jailer stepped up behind his drooping

head, and grasping the nose with one hand, squeezed it until he couldn't breathe. Another crop-haired servant of the bishop took the same liberty with Suzanne. Then both fellows leaned down to the water-buckets, without relaxing the pressure on the nostrils, and with the free hand they each brought up a deep ladle or dipper. Slowly but steadily they let the water drop into the gasping throats, that would rather breathe than drink.

A pint of water to begin with, Little Robert had ordered. At this early stage the trick was to give the prisoner the experience of choking, short of actual death. As the torture progressed the problem would be to force more liquid, and still more, into the bloated frame without bursting it. Of course Master Villon and the poor tumbler could end the experiment at any moment by saying what Little Robert wished, but then, as they knew, they would strangle in air.

When the first pint had been poured into them, Little Robert waited with admirable patience until the agonized gulping began to quiet down, and the writhing bodies relaxed on the machine. He nodded to the jailers, and the thumbs and fingers let in the breath again.

'François Villon,' said Little Robert, 'what were you and Suzanne talking about in the stable of the inn at Beaugency?'

'I wasn't in the stable—we didn't talk—I never saw her before you brought me to this place!'

Little Robert paused, that his next words might fall hard. 'I have only a few minutes for this business! Would you like now to swallow a full gallon? Or will you tell the truth?'

Master Villon's voice shook, perhaps because his nerves were unsettled by the mere pint, but he clung to his story. 'It's the truth! So help me!'

Little Robert raised his eyebrows and beckoned to the tortures to resume. 'Suzanne, when you met François Villon in the stable...'

'She's fainting,' said the jailer who had stepped up to apply the quart.

'An old trick,' said Little Robert. 'She has room, I should think, for several more questions.'

With the stopping of the nostrils and the turning-on of the water again, Suzanne was twisting on the machine, struggling for her life. A minute or two later Master Villon was in trouble. Little Robert watched the two bodies with an expert eye, ignoring as of slight importance the rapidly distending bellies, but noting the pounding of the heart, the throbbing of the temples.

'She's fainted again,' said the jailer.

Little Robert took the news calmly. 'She didn't really faint before. Pour on! If she breathes she can swallow.' 'She doesn't breathe—she's stopped swallowing.'

'A full quart,' insisted Little Robert without raising his voice.

The stream splashed from Suzanne's mouth as from the top of a filled bottle. Master Villon was making a last struggle against the ropes that bound him, trying not to breathe the liquid into his lungs.

At that moment a door slammed in the dungeon.

'Ah!' said Little Robert, in a cheerful polite tone, 'we'll rest for a while. Untie their arms—let them sit up.'

'Go right on, go right on! I wished His Majesty to see our justice at work.'

The speaker sounded like a learned man, precise and gentle.

'Who are the questioned? What is the charge?'

Master Villon, with his arms free, lifted his head and coughed up a generous flood on the jailer's feet. The jailer stepped back, annoyed.

The gentle learned man spoke. 'Sire, the fellow who is just coming to is François Villon. The woman is...'

'The woman is dead, I think,' said the other voice, authoritative but with a strange drawl in it, almost a whine. Master Villon turned his aching neck to see what had happened to Suzanne.

The jailers had brought the woman to a sitting posture, but she had fallen forward, unconscious. The sight put Master Villon in a gust of anger. He coughed again, to be sure he could speak.

'Sire,' he pleaded in a hoarse whisper, 'justice for us both!'

One of the new arrivals was a tallish person in a long robe, wearing a round cap that fitted the back of his head. He was ascetic or thin. His face was deeply lined and he wore a fixed smile. Perhaps Little Robert imitated him.

The other visitor was short, fox-faced, bent in the shoulders yet not old. His eyes were restless. When looking your way they went through you. He wore a hat turned up at the sides and pulled down in front, and a fur-trimmed jacket that reached hardly below his waist.

Those eyes disposed of Master Villon, then fastened on the man in the robe. 'Has she confessed, bishop?'

'Not yet.'

'Then it's too soon to let her die! Free her legs there! Turn her on her stomach! Work her arms up and down!'

The jailers sprang to obey the sharp commands, given in a terrifying tone, which suggested dark possibilities in the hump-shouldered man. Even the bishop and Little Robert leaned forward, for a tense minute, to be sure the efforts at revival were not too late.

'Hold her upside-down, by the heels!'

This last treatment having relieved the lungs, Suzanne announced her recovery by a groan.

'There!' said the voice with a drawl. 'Take her out and I'll talk to her later.'

Two of the jailers covered the white body with the garments they had torn off, and carried her up the stairs.

The fox-face veered around to the bishop. 'What was the charge? Who brought it?'

The bishop stopped smiling. 'Sire, you might say I accused them...'

'I might, eh? Of what?'

The bishop looked embarrassed. 'He's a notorious law-breaker, and the College of Navarre was robbed...'

'Where's your evidence?'

'Sire, we hoped they would confess...'

'We? That means you? Who's the judge here?'

'If you please, Sire...' began Little Robert.

'Aren't you the hangman? And judge too? Very economical!'

'If Your Majesty will allow me to explain,' said the bishop, more than worried.

The fox-face smiled. 'Who am I to find fault with a man of God? If you'll now leave me with François Villon—unbind his legs—I'll ask a question of my own.'

When the bishop, Little Robert and the clerk had gone through the private door, and the remaining jailers had hastened up the steep steps, the bent-shouldered man knit his brows at Master Villon.

'You may sit on that machine. Why did you ask for justice?'

'You are the king, Sire. If you are not just, who will be?'

Louis the Eleventh sat down in the clerk's chair, crossed his knees, put up his elbow, and rested his chin in his hand.

'Are you a friend of Robert d'Estouteville?'

'Sire, I am not!'

Louis was amused at the vigorous answer. 'Neither am I! He is no longer Provost of Paris. How do you get on with his wife?'

The inquiry caught Master Villon off his guard, but he met the king's eye frankly. 'She was my friend. I hope she still is.'

Louis was silent, a thoughtful moment. Master Villon liked the fox-face, perhaps because it was not altogether without a resemblance to his own.

'I know your record,' said Louis. 'D'Estouteville is an enemy of mine. My spies watched his wife—and noticed you. I'll ask one or two questions, and if I don't approve of the answers Little Robert can hang you.'

'Sire, I will tell you the truth.'

'No one else has done it yet,' said Louis. 'When the bishop set Little Robert to work on you, it was at d'Estouteville's suggestion. He didn't mention it, knowing how d'Estouteville stands with me. Did you help rob the College of Navarre?'

Master Villon braced himself. 'Sire, I was one of them,

I confess. I've been guilty of even worse, in the days when . . .'

'Before you thought you were in love with a pretty complexion?' asked the king.

Master Villon was silent.

'Louise de Grigny is a presentable girl,' said the king. 'I don't think she'd marry you, even if that hot-tempered old father of hers should change his mind. Was it really a boar or was it you broke his back?'

'His back?' echoed Master Villon, shocked.

'He can't walk, anyway,' said the king. 'He's home in bed swearing at you. Who is that other girl, the one who tries to get money out of your godfather?'

'Catherine?' asked Master Villon, startled.

'I believe that *is* the name,' said Louis. 'I can't blame her. I got some money out of your godfather myself. He has paid what you took from the College of Navarre.'

'Sire!' exclaimed Master Villon. 'It's something off my conscience.'

One side of the king's mouth twitched. 'I didn't say the college has its money back. I said your godfather gave it to me. Did you steal the bailiff's horse?'

'Sire, I left my own in its place.'

'The bailiff has returned to Bourges,' said Louis. 'Being seen in your clothes broke his spirits. The bishop would like to know where his horse is.'

'Sire, I exchanged it again, and left the new one behind when the constables chased me.'

Louis uncrossed his legs, drew the chair up to the clerk's table, made use of the quill and the ink-horn which the clerk in his haste had left behind, and scratched away on a bit of paper. Master Villon used the time to put on his clothes.

'You have told the truth,' said the king, 'unless my servants have misinformed me. I see nothing admirable in your replies. I believe I shall hang you.'

Master Villon inclined his head and sat motionless.

'But not quite yet,' continued Louis. 'Here's a safe-conduct, dated to-day and good for one year precisely.

Unless you lose this paper, few will interfere with you.'

He took a purse from his pocket. 'I'll know where you are and what you are doing. Here's money to start with. When I meet you again I'll tell you whether you've been stealing.'

He stood up. Master Villon got to his feet.

'Sire, I owe my life . . .'

'You're free. Where will you go?'

Master Villon tried to think of a place far away. 'To Saint-Maixent, Sire.'

Without another word the king helped him up the stairs, through the dark corridor to the prison door. The jailer who had brought the bread-crusts was standing by the lock, bowing low.

'François Villon,' said Louis, 'is free, and under my protection.'

Master Villon gave one look back, at the bent figure with the fur-trimmed cap and coat, then stepped out into the streets of Meung.

He found the pavements very uneven. His legs were weak and his head was dizzy.

*Tell me where, in what far country,
 Roman Flora, fair of brow,
 Hipparchia and matchless Thais
 Spread their sweet enchantments now?
 Where is Echo, whose plaintive call
 The river-bank and the marshes bear—
 She who was once so beautiful?
 But where are the snows that fell last year!*

*Where is the learned Héloïse,
 She for whom Abélard gave up
 His manhood and was vowed a monk?
 Love poured for them this bitter cup!
 Where is the queen who bade them take
 John Buridan—he loved her dear!—
 And toss him, sack-bound, into the Seine?
 But where are the snows that fell last year!*

*Queen Blanche, the White Queen, lily-white,
 Whose singing had the sirens' lure,
 Big-Foot Bertha, Beitris, Alis,
 She who held Maine, Queen Arembour,
 And Joan the Good whom the English gave
 To the Rouen fire, to scar and sear—
 Virgin Mother, where are they, where?
 But where are the snows that fell last year!*

*Prince, think not in a week to know
 Where they are—not even in a year.
 An endless burden sounds for you—
 Where are the snows that fell last year!*

He Looks for What Is Gone

THE INHABITANTS OF POITIERS SMILED WHEN MASTER Villon inquired the way to Saint-Maixent, from which he concluded that it was a small place. All the easier to find Henri Dubois, the apothecary, who with reasonable luck must have rejoined his family by this time, and doubtless rode daily on the bailiff's horse.

It was a wintry forenoon when Master Villon finished his long walk, not cold, so far south, but with a chill in the sapless air. The vines on the house-fronts and on the walls enclosing the farmyards were leafless. In spite of the season, Master Villon observed, the country-side was not grim and grey, like Paris. His much-loved Paris, always terrible in a frost! Here there might be foxes, but no wolves.

He made his way to what seemed the centre of the town. Nothing but empty streets. He had a feeling that more than one curious pair of eyes might be examining him through shutters that appeared to be tight-bolted, but he saw no human being.

Not till he reached the small house at the corner of the square. A diminutive child, warmly clad, played quietly just outside the door. As he approached, a sharp domestic voice sounded from inside.

'Gerard, come here!'

'Why, mother?' The child kept on at his play.

'Not another word, Gerard Dubois! Come in at once!'

'But I just came out!'

A slender decisive woman shot from the door. 'God, but you're like your father!' She seized the child by the arm and glared at Master Villon. She was attractive even in anger. Master Villon decided it was her high white forehead, her straight dark hair, and the way she carried herself.

He stepped up and doffed his cap. 'Does Monsieur Henri Dubois, the apothecary, live here?'

'What's your errand with him?' asked the woman, pushing the reluctant child into the house.

'We met in Beaugency,' said Master Villon. 'He bought a horse. I should like to be sure his health is good and the horse all that I promised.'

The woman clung to her caution. There was a tragic cast in this foot-traveller's keen face, a threat of dilapidation in his costume.

'He's well enough,' she said. 'I've heard no complaints from him.'

'Is he at home?'

'I couldn't say.'

'I'm sorry—I hoped to see him.'

The woman began to relent. 'He may be in his workshop, mixing drugs. Who is it—what name?'

Master Villon tried to recall whether he had attached any name to himself when he met the apothecary at Beaugency. It wasn't his custom. He took a chance. 'Montcorbier—François Montcorbier.'

He was not offended that the woman shut the door and left him on the outside. Her caution, he thought, did her credit, especially since she kept him waiting only a minute. When she returned, the apothecary, sheathed in a much-stained apron, followed at her heels.

'It's you!' he cried, recognizing the visitor at first glimpse.

'Henri couldn't place the name,' said the wife, faithful to her love of facts. 'It's lucky you sold him the horse.'

'I remember the name perfectly,' protested the apothecary, to keep his hospitality warm. 'Mont—Mont—come right in, anyway!'

'François Montcorbier,' said Master Villon, going through the door. 'It's an old name, but easily forgotten. What a noble house!'

He gazed into several small rooms, all of which the noonday cooking had scented pleasantly.

'You will break bread with us,' said the apothecary.

'There's no meat, Henri,' said his wife, not ungraciously, but to dispose of false hopes.

'I can't stay,' said Master Villon, conveying a tinge of regret.

'Oh, you must!' countered the apothecary, leading straight to the kitchen, where a large steam-spouting pot hung above the hearth-fire. 'There's an onion-soup preparing, as you may have guessed, and with cheese and a fresh loaf, to say nothing of a bottle...'

Before the wine was finished Master Villon was established at Saint-Maixent as tutor to Gerard Dubois, going on three, the son of the house. The engagement was brought about quite unintentionally by the mother, Héloïse—'better-mannered than the hussy she was named after', as her husband testified. Watching Master Villon dip up the soup, and not yet ready to trust him, she asked what else he did besides trading horses and visiting the country on foot.

Master Villon put down his spoon and smiled modestly. 'Madame Dubois, the horse was a windfall. I'm a poor scholar, trained in letters and in law.'

'Civil?' asked the apothecary.

'Both kinds.'

Madame Héloïse saw what her husband was aiming at, and she disapproved. 'Monsieur Montcorbier wouldn't enjoy so quiet a life.'

'Have you a degree?' asked the apothecary, paying no attention to her.

'Master of Arts,' said François modestly, 'but I don't over-value my learning. I'm an ignorant man.'

Even Madame Héloïse was impressed by the Master of Arts.

'At least,' said the apothecary Dubois hopefully, 'you could teach my son to read?'

'A clever child like that? With ease!'

The child's mother was won by the compliment. 'Gerard is bright, for his years. But then, my father's brother could read, and of course my husband has to, in his profession.'

'You could also teach him to write, couldn't you?' said the apothecary. 'He is to follow the law—perhaps I told you. You would know how to introduce him to the first principles, at the proper time? In return for board and lodging, that is?'

'Very generous,' said Master Villon, hiding his delight at this ripe prospect, 'but in a hard world I've found it convenient to earn a piece of gold each year, for clothes—and this and that.'

To point his remarks, he glanced down at himself.

'You can't teach Gerard all the time,' said Madame Héloïse. 'Let Henri find you more work—letters to write, papers to copy...'

'What a piece of luck!' exclaimed Henri. 'The notary died last summer, and now we can't even make a will without sending to Lusignan. Master Montcorbier, you arrive at a happy moment!'

'Most people,' corrected his wife, 'get the notary from Niort.'

Master Villon had hoped to find a refuge in Saint-Maixent, but he hadn't looked for this cloudburst of good fortune. Madame Héloïse, for all her sharp tongue, was an excellent housekeeper. He found himself in a clean room, with a soft bed. The apothecary stood well with his fellow-townsmen. In no time whatever Master Villon was an established notary, with a steady inflow of modest but welcome fees.

As a schoolmaster his success is harder to gauge. Gerard became warmly attached to him, but perhaps for irregular reasons. He learned to read and write, with no great brilliancy in either art, but the awakening of his mind occurred whenever Master Villon—or Master Montcorbier the notary—illustrated the true method of climbing a tree or getting over a wall. This instruction was, you might say, premature, but Gerard grasped the underlying principles and balanced himself miraculously on the household furniture, to his mother's terror. Master Villon-Montcorbier explained to her that the education of the body should go hand-in-hand with the training of the mind, particularly in the case of one who intends to have dealings with the law.

Winter passed, the mild southern winter, then spring came, an unbelievable glory, long-protracted, then summer, with its hot golden mornings, its dust-laden after-

noons, its clear nights, when the call of bird or barnyard animal, or the laugh of boy or girl, reached from a distance through the stillness.

Master Villon had a new suit, plain as befitted a learned man, but spotless and whole. He bought it with his own money. Since his purse was full and growing fuller, he acquired a firm reputation as a thrifty soul but prompt-paying. Twice he was consulted in the purchase of a horse. His strange condition kept for him a fresh and amusing charm.

But with the turn of autumn he grew thoughtful. The memory of his old days died hard, and some of it, he found, refused to die at all. Such a life as this had been his dream, when Louise had believed in him. He had made the vision out of nothing but faith, yet here it was, accomplished fact. When regret stole upon him, he shook it off since it was vain, but Gerard missed the gaiety which had taken the sting from learning.

A good winter, nonetheless, till spring for a second time roused the landscape to green and yellow riots.

'Henri Dubois,' said Master Villon in mid-dinner, 'your son is industrious. I shall, with your permission, give him a fortnight's holiday.'

Madame Héloïse looked worried.

'What on earth can I do with him, playing around the house?'

Even the apothecary looked troubled. 'I should think he ought to keep at it, Master Montcorbier. I am no scholar myself, except in drugs, but whenever I give myself a rest—as when I met you—I lose some of my knowledge. Unbroken habit props the mind.'

Master Villon smiled frankly. 'I am asking for myself. My mother, who lives just outside Paris...'

'I thought you came from Orleans,' said Madame Héloïse.

'Originally from Paris, or near it,' said Master Villon. 'Near Pontoise,' he added, reflecting that it's a pleasure to tell the truth when there's no danger.

'My mother,' he continued, 'is old, and the sight of me would be a great strength to her.'

'You'll go to Paris and come back in a fortnight?' asked Madame Héloïse.

'Perhaps a day or so longer, but a quick turn in any case.'

'You'll need a horse,' said the apothecary, with a long face.

'I've purchased one—at least the butcher will sell me the animal if I decide to go.'

'A good steady beast too,' said Gerard's father, relieved that his own spirited mount would not be requisitioned. 'But I share my wife's perplexity. I wonder what we'll do with the boy. A keen mind like his should be occupied.'

The keen mind disentangled itself from porridge. 'Can I go with Master Montcorbier?'

His mother lifted her apron and cleaned his face. 'You'll stay right here!'

The boy slid down in his chair, pouting. 'He said he would give me a holiday, he said he would give me a holiday, he said he would . . .'

Madame Héloïse raised the hand she used for slapping, and there was prudent silence. Gerard sat up again in his chair. 'Mother, what's a holiday?'

No more was said in the boy's presence, but when Master Villon found himself alone with the parents he offered profound educational reasons why he should acquire the butcher's horse and go to Paris.

'The child is young for any study at all, and we've been at it more than a year. It was possible because of the gifts of God in him, over and above what he inherited. But we shouldn't train the mind beyond the muscles. If I am out of his sight for a few days, you can let him exercise himself in the street, and I dare say he won't once think of his studies. When I return he'll be as fresh for learning as a hungry wolf.'

'That's the part I'm not sure of,' said Madame Héloïse.

'Put your doubts at rest,' said Master Villon. 'I know him as if he were my own son.'

A few days later he waved farewell to the three of them, where they stood on the steps before the house, and started

the butcher's horse northward. He was travelling like an honest man, in no fear of the law. King Louis's safe-conduct, it is true, had expired, but who ever looked at a date when a king's name was there to dazzle them?

It wasn't Paris he meant to visit, anyway, and though he thought of his mother, another memory came first. At the end of his long ride he got down at the door of the Belle Image, where the Seine flows through the village of Corbeil. There, a stone's-throw away, was the river-bank where he and Louise had found each other.

At the sound of a footstep he turned and saw the innkeeper, ready with his welcome. The hostler came running, to hold the horse.

'Have you ridden far, monsieur?'

'From Orleans,' said Master Villon, unstrapping his modest baggage from the saddle. 'Have you a clean room for me?'

The innkeeper was holding the door open. 'Clean, monsieur? There are no cleaner in Paris. If monsieur will follow me—the stairs are narrow . . .'

Master Villon chose a small chamber which looked toward the river.

'Hasn't monsieur dined here, two years ago?'

'Less than that,' said Master Villon. 'I shall need the room for three nights, perhaps longer.'

'Perfectly, monsieur. The name, now—it was almost on my tongue.'

Master Villon reminded himself of the label he had assumed, that other time. 'Des Loges.'

'Of course. It was on my tongue.'

'Will you see that my horse is well rubbed?'

'With my own eyes, monsieur.'

Before Master Villon unpacked his things, he sat on the bed and put his plans in order. He had come to the inn to satisfy a heart-hunger, but now that he was there the journey seemed futile. He would not travel so far to feed himself on landscape. If Louise was in her father's house, a smart ride would bring him to her—that is, if she would now speak to him, as probably she would not.

Had so little time flowed by since they had met by those river-bushes? It was in autumn, he remembered, and the foliage was ageing but still thick. Now the leaves were a fragile green. Then she had believed all he said of himself—believed he was chiefly a poet, believed he was travelling in innocence, to enjoy the accidents of the highway, believed—as long as she could—that he was an honest man. Now that he had succeeded at last in throwing off his old wildness, he could never persuade her that he was not a rascal. Never—not even if he could talk to her again.

He rose and unpacked his wallet. A change of garments, a few sheets of parchment, a quill, a tight-fastened bottle of ink. He looked to be sure the ink hadn't spilled. He had been thinking of a poem, which this absence from the apothecary's house might put him in the mood to compose. Gerard was what a boy usually is by nature, a noisy little animal. Verses were not made under the same roof with him.

It was a marvellous luxury to be travelling with money enough to pay his bills! He recalled his embarrassment, dining downstairs with Louise and her father—a gold piece in his pocket all the time, a stolen gold piece. To think of that episode made him squirm, even though he did put the money back. Well, he would see what kind of food the innkeeper had on the hearth to-night. No use grieving. He was hungry.

But seated at the table where Louise had invited him to be her guest, he would have pursued intimate and tender thoughts, if the innkeeper hadn't come over to him, napkin in hand.

'You were with the Seigneur de Grigny, weren't you? And his daughter? I remember you perfectly! You had some bread and cheese first. Too bad about her, isn't it?'

'Who?'

'Mademoiselle Louise—but you know, surely?'

'What's happened?'

'The surgeon is puzzled—she grows thinner every day. And the seigneur can't walk.' The innkeeper shook his head, not too sadly, over the misfortunes of the great.

'How long,' said Master Villon, 'has she suffered this illness, or whatever it is?'

'Mademoiselle? Oh, the best part of a year. She isn't ill, you understand—not that they are sure of. She walks and rides, and just fades away. Ah well, it is life. May I serve monsieur a slice of the roast?'

'Can that hostler of yours ride?'

'Why not, monsieur? But at the moment I have no horse.'

'Let him take mine. Paper, if you please—pen—ink—thank you. I'll write a note of greeting to mademoiselle.' Under his breath he added, 'and her father.'

When the hostler was mounted, Master Villon gave him a silver coin and suggested that mademoiselle should have the message in her own hands, and it would be well to wait for a reply. Then the horse galloped away, and the innkeeper said the roast was on the table.

Master Villon sat himself down again, so wrapped in thought that the meat grew cold. His few words to Louise said nothing of love, nothing of her father's misfortune, nothing of her rumoured malady. He had written only that he was at the Belle Image, at that very table, and he would ride to Grigny to-morrow if she wished to see him.

Because the innkeeper looked unhappy he turned to the meal, which, had he known it, was intended to make up for any distrust of him on the earlier visit.

She might, of course, send no answer, and that would make the hostler think meanly of him. Or perhaps not—he could pretend it was one of those notes which required a reply only under certain conditions. After all, when he parted from Louise her father had just tried to murder him, and he had behaved rather handsomely to the bloody-minded old man. Even had he borne himself less well, she wouldn't be discourteous. But it *would* be a grim joke if the hostler delivered that brief message to the bed-ridden seigneur!

'Will monsieur try our pudding?' The innkeeper with his napkin again.

'I suppose it's too early for fruit?'

'Berries so soon? Ah, monsieur!'

'Pudding, then.'

If Louise did indeed encourage his visit, what could he say to her? He had come without a clear purpose, inspired by a vague need. She must know that the bread he now ate was honestly earned, that he dwelt in peace, that the men with whom he worked daily were his friends. He wanted her to know that—but to come running with his reputation in his hand was too much like a boy from school, with a good report.

He also wished to say he loved her, would always love her, would love no one else. Of course she would ask about Catherine and Ambroise. Any woman would. She might not ask at once, but in a little while the question would slip out and they would have one of those queer arguments, the man swearing what the woman longs to hear, and the woman trying to prove him a liar because she hopes he tells truth.

What he most would conceal was the humbleness of his fortune, now that he had reformed. Could he ask her to go and live with him in Saint-Maixent? When he had nothing but his dreams, he had splendid dreams, but now he knew what toil went into his wages. If Louise rode off with him her father would disown her, if he did nothing worse. Master Villon could not see in himself a fair match for a lovely, well-born girl.

'Will monsieur have more wine?'

'I'll go to my room,' said Master Villon, withdrawing his legs from under the table. 'Let me have two candles—I've writing to do till your man returns.'

'Is it a poem, monsieur? Mademoiselle Louise, I recall, asked what kind of poem...'

'I'll need the candles now,' said Master Villon, going up the stairs in a bad humour.

To remind him of that other evening was to quicken the regret which already he found overpowering, regret not for his fate alone but for the relentless changes imposed by time. Even by a short span of time. Louise and the seigneur had driven up in their coach—was it yester-

day?—and she was bounding with health and happy, and the seigneur was, you might say, in his prime. Now...

Master Villon stared out the window, into the night. Then he took his quill and his ink-bottle and began to set down a phrase or two, a line, a mere name. Louise, the innkeeper said, was fading away. He repeated the tragic requiem of all beauty and love, thinking of her but summoning dead ladies long remembered to stand in her place.

He did not notice what hours had gone to his thoughts and his verse-making, till the sound of slackening hoof-beats roused him. The door closed downstairs and he heard the hostler stamping up. He waited with his pen poised. If he betrayed his eagerness, and then if there were no message...

'From Mademoiselle de Grigny,' said the hostler, breathing hard to show how diligently he had ridden.

Master Villon tore open the note.

To-morrow, just before noon, on the highway, near the house but not in sight of it...

He glanced up at the hostler. 'Did mademoiselle write this herself?'

'I saw her, monsieur.'

He took out his purse and gave the man a fat coin, though the supply was dwindling. 'You have done your errand well. Look to the horse. I shall ride in the morning—ten at the latest.'

So she would see him! That must be her meaning. She might rebuke him, or at last dismiss him, but something of her wish was in her words.

Master Villon that night enjoyed deep and happy slumber.

He was up with the sun, impatient.

'Monsieur commanded the room for three nights,' said the innkeeper, implying injury.

'I pay for them,' said Master Villon, counting out the sum with the Seigneur de Grigny's own manner.

'For service I have not given you?' The innkeeper pretended embarrassment.

'Give me credit for two nights when I come again.'

'If monsieur insists,' said the innkeeper, pocketing the money. 'Is monsieur called forth by bad news?'

'Bad? I should say it was excellent.' Master Villon put his purse away and rose from his hearty breakfast at the long table.

'Then mademoiselle is better?'

'So far as I know.'

'Ah!' The innkeeper looked puzzled. 'Others beside yourself, monsieur, will be glad.'

To this cautious remark Master Villon gave small attention at the moment, having the day's prospect to occupy him.

Before his horse was saddled he had packed his frugal luggage and was waiting at the door, with the innkeeper again at his elbow, to see him off.

'When will monsieur ride this way again?'

'Not for a month or so,' said Master Villon, fastening his bag to the saddle and wishing the man would stop asking questions.

'The room will always be here. A good journey to monsieur!'

In his impatience Master Villon had started too early, even though he made slower time than the seigneur's coach. How long had he ridden on that night, with Louise by his side? He had been busy then marking other things than the distance. Now, tedious as his progress seemed, with frequent pauses to be sure of the road, he was startled when he came out from behind a screen of trees and saw vineyards spread before him, and on one side of them the walled garden, and the friendly apple-boughs where he had climbed over.

He reined in sharply. The great house was as silent as when he had seen it first. For any sign of life, it might as well be deserted. Was she really there? Could anything come out of that sombre picture to match the beating of his heart?

Slowly he turned and rode again towards Corbeil. The note had warned him to keep out of sight. For an hour

he walked his horse back and forth. Or was it less than an hour? To him it seemed more.

He had just set out for Corbeil—the hundredth time, he thought—when he heard a rider behind him. It was she at last, radiant as he had never seen her, bright colour in her cheeks and a laugh in her voice.

'Oh, you *did* come, François! On the minute!'

He kissed her hand as they rode side-by-side. 'I feared I had come too soon.' He tried to speak calmly, but the words trembled.

'Too soon?' She laughed outright. 'Well, here you are at last! Where will you take me?'

He looked at her, surprised, and saw the strange brilliance in her brown eyes, now larger than ever. And she had painted that bloom on an ashen face. He stopped riding.

'They told me you had been . . .'

'Don't speak of it, François. Come! Where shall we go?'

He spurred to her. 'If we could meet again—and I could tell you—make you understand—but you have been very ill . . .'

She gave him her old smile. 'I am well now. We'll talk no more about things that happened long ago. To-day! I am ready to go with you at last.'

His astonishment amused her. 'Don't you still love me?' She was teasing him.

'You know I do!'

'I don't know—I hope.'

They stopped and put down the reins, for their kiss. 'Some place where we never were—a fresh world!' she cried.

'The southern country—you need the warmth and the light!'

'It is spring here, François!'

'But there we have a better sun!'

She laughed. 'Is there another sun? But where you will—with you!'

Half-way through the afternoon, on the road south, they came to a village they couldn't name, which boasted

a tiny inn with a large sign. Louise deciphered the weather-dimmed letters.

'Oh, what a frank landlord! He calls it the Three Children—this must be the fiery furnace. Do let's stop here, I'm hungry!'

While Master Villon was helping her down, an awkward boy came out to take the horses.

'A room to ourselves, my husband! I need rest. Have the food sent up there.'

The boy looked at her from under shaggy hair. 'Meal-time is past, my lady.'

'Cook us an omelet,' said Master Villon. 'Cheese—anything—and some wine.'

Ungraciously the boy brought the innkeeper from the kitchen. There was no other household than the boy and this man, who looked his guests over with a cautious eye.

'A room for the night, monsieur?'

'We may stay the night—we may ride on. A room now! And food!'

The boy carried up Master Villon's bag, the landlord went back to where he came from, and Master Villon found himself alone with Louise in a simple apartment—two chairs, a dresser, and a straw-stuffed bed. She took both his hands in hers.

'Is it as you wished, François?'

'More than I dared dream of!'

Her joyous manner never flagged, she was happy over the simple dishes the innkeeper brought, she called the country wine rare, she admired the view from the window, though it looked on nothing more than the other side of the village square. Master Villon tried to match her mood, but now that she removed her hat he could see how thin her face had grown. His happiness was poisoned with indefinable fear.

When the boy came back for the dishes and left them to themselves with the unfinished wine-bottle, she rose and bolted the door. When he offered to help her, she turned and threw her arms about his neck.

'You are my lover!' she whispered. 'I am your wife!'

As the sunlight marked the waning afternoon, it was she who thought they should ride on.

'The day is too short!' It seemed to him that she sighed.

'But to-morrow, my darling, and after to-morrow—a lifetime!'

She met his eyes, and he saw how haggard she was.

'François! With just one day more—was not this the way to spend it?'

He was too frightened to ask her what she meant.

'Poor boy! And poor me! But this at least we had! You came in time!'

Who's there?

'Tis I.

And who are you?

Your heart,

Your loyal heart, now clinging by a thread,

My strength, my substance and my blood drained out,

Since you I see defeated and half dead.

Poor whipped dog, can you only cringe and shrink?

Well, who's to blame?

You and the years you lost.

What do you care?

Must I not pay the cost?

Leave me in peace!

Why should I?

Let me think!

When will you?

Later—when I'm old—some day.

I say no more—there's nothing more to say.

He Speaks to the Seigneur

SHE LOOKED UP AT HIM FROM THE CHAIR IN THEIR room at the inn. If pain showed in her eyes, it was from the wound her words had given him.

'It's well as it is, François, but you had to know.'

'Know what?'

'The surgeon told father I might live a month, if I kept to my couch and hardly lifted a hand. What a queer life that would be, wouldn't it! Now the month is up, and you came back.'

Master Villon took her in his arms, all but lifted her to the bed, where he could hold her close and try to believe she had not spoken truth.

'You *can't* be in such danger! As we rode to-day I thought what vigour and spirit—Louise, a week in the sunlight at Saint-Maixent—the surgeon is a country fool! No one drops off, so young, of nothing at all!'

She drew his hand down over her heart. 'Didn't you feel it? I thought I might not have to tell you. There—how it hurries—and that long moment when it stops. Some days it hardly beats at all.'

Master Villon gathered himself together. 'We'll ride slowly and find a real physician, something better than a barber!'

She laughed, but he heard sadness. 'We'll ride home, François. I gave the servants all my gold not to breathe that I had seized these hours. Do you remember your gold piece? I thought I would never part with it, but I gave it to my maid.'

He was about to cry out against the servants, but she prevented him with a kiss.

'One thing more, François—this illness began long ago. In Paris, the day I promised to flee with you, even then—I said I must go back first for some pretty clothes, and you were impatient with me, but I had to lie down and rest.'

He raised her to her feet. 'Are you strong enough to ride now?'

'I'll manage it—we must go.'

'Sick or well, you are mine! We'll stay here to-night, and to-morrow...'

She was putting on her hat, with sudden briskness. 'Don't argue, François. If I gave out on the way, what wouldn't they do to you?'

'Nothing will go wrong—we'll ride slowly till I can find a coach. Then we'll sell the horses and...'

She unbolted the door of the room. 'You love me; you will do what I ask.'

Against his will, then, he brought her again to that place in the highway, just before the vineyards and the château of Grigny. He held the horses down to their easiest paces, and it was growing dark when they arrived.

'How will you enter without your father's knowledge? Let me go in with you and face him!'

The ride had tired her, but she summoned up a merry laugh. 'Wouldn't that calm him! François, you have the best ideas! Kiss me!'

'I'll be here in the morning, Louise.'

'Oh, no, don't!'

'I'll ask for you till they let me in!'

She seemed about to plead with him, then abruptly waved her hand and rode on, each hoof-beat striking, softer and softer, on the raw nerves of his brain. The bell at the big gate, which he once had jangled, did not ring now. Someone was waiting to let her in.

In the fresh evening, star-lighted, he and his weary horse retraced the miles to Corbeil and the Belle Image. No other shelter came to mind—and besides, the room was paid for, and there was little left in his purse.

The hostler was surprised to see him, but the innkeeper still more. In fact, the innkeeper was not only astonished but disappointed.

'So soon, monsieur? Did you have an accident?'

'I changed my plans,' said Master Villon, easing himself out of the saddle with no great enthusiasm. 'Give me that room again. I expect to ride on in the morning.'

'And you found mademoiselle in the best of health?'

Master Villon walked firmly upstairs without replying. That night he wrote no verses.

A bright sun woke him, a marvellous day. He hurried into his clothes, went down to the big table for his breakfast, answered or parried the interminable questions of the innkeeper, and started for Grigny shortly before eight o'clock. The country by the roadside could not seem lovelier—fresh fields, young leaves on the bushes, dew still on the grass. Because he now knew the road, it seemed short, and he found himself pulling up his horse in full sight of the seigneur's house.

The place had changed. It was no longer silent and deserted. The big gate was swung open, carriages and horsemen were going in. At each side stood a servant showing the coachmen where to drive.

Master Villon did not at first read the meaning of this activity. He reflected that the men at the entrance might well be two of those who had guarded the seigneur's coach, and at the seigneur's command had once thrown him out of the château.

A priest and two attendants paused at the gate, then passed through.

Master Villon drove in the spurs, and his horse brought him where the priest had stood. He leaned from the saddle. 'Mademoiselle de Grigny—how is she?'

The attendant walked towards him and answered in a low voice. 'Monsieur, you have not heard? She died last night.'

Master Villon sat on his horse and gazed vacantly towards the door of the château, where the great folk who came in coaches were leaving sympathetic expressions of their grief.

'Will you enter, monsieur? Your horse blocks the path—there is another carriage...'

Master Villon fastened the reins to a hitching-post and went up the steps. The man who leaned out to catch his name wore a black suit, and his face was set in a tragic decorum.

'Tell the seigneur that Monsieur François des Loges would present his condolences in person.'

At the name the man looked up startled. 'The seigneur can see nobody.'

'To-day,' said Master Villon, 'he will see me. Tell him so!'

The messenger called another to his place at the door, but the errand took no time at all.

'Monsieur des Loges, the Seigneur de Grigny bids me say he cannot see you. Also, if he *could* see you, he would beg to be excused. Also, he would count it a favour if you left his house at once.'

Some of the visitors heard the comprehensive rebuke, and turned to stare at Monsieur des Loges. Master Villon went slowly down the steps, got on his horse, and rode out. Not having his mind on where he was going, he took the northern direction, towards Paris.

If he was patient under the seigneur's sharp words, it was because he still groped for the truth about Louise. In spite of those condoling visitors and the priest, it seemed fantastic for the gateman to say she was dead. It was easier to suppose that the mourners were guests at a feast, and she was walking from room to room, welcoming them, and only for stubbornness the seigneur would not let him in.

From his boyhood, like other men in his time, he had grown up with the idea of death for neighbour. Life and death was the familiar formula—with the emphasis not upon life, but upon some abrupt departure from it. But with Louise was associated only the thought of life. That their love should be happy, even for a moment, had seemed impossible, but he had never doubted the prosperity and the length of days that would belong to her. Yet yesterday had been his—and here was to-day to challenge him.

In his poems he had said wise things about the shortness of the sunlight and the unhappy speed with which the darkness arrived. But now wisdom failed him, even articulate judgements, even the full edge of his grief. What thoughts he had, not thoughts but feelings rather, were less for himself than for her.

The highway ran along the river. He had walked that path the morning the farmer roused him from his stolen bed in the hay. In another half-hour he caught sight of the very farm from which he had retired in haste, that remote daybreak. The memory gave him a pang because it brought back his first approach to the house of Grigny when he explored the upper rooms, and helped himself temporarily to the piece of gold. His last theft! Or perhaps his happiness yesterday was a kind of thieving. Is all happiness stolen? Is it the quality of happiness that it never belongs to you, and cannot be earned?

The highway was leading him into a village, of which his knowledge was slight, because when he had passed through it, going towards Grigny, it had been dark—just before he discovered the farmer's hay-mow. Now he saw that the houses looked prosperous, and the people were not few.

In the one square, before the Town Hall, there was a sizable crowd, children largely, but also men and women, intent on some performance which from moment to moment they applauded.

Master Villon drew to the edge of the circle. Habit made him pause rather than any support of his will. The performers, he saw, were three jugglers, two men and a woman—yet it was a long moment before he recognized them. Their costumes were new and smart. Nothing in their appearance suggested a vagabond life.

He followed most closely the agile antics of Suzanne. Little Robert, it would seem, had done her no permanent harm. When she finished the act and bowed on all sides to the crowd, the smoothness of her cheeks, the vivacious smile, were worth your astonishment, if you happened to know what tortures she had undergone a little over a year ago.

When she looked his way and recognized him, he got down from his horse to greet her. The crowd circled around them in admiration, envying the traveller who was on terms with such an artist.

'Here you are again!' said Suzanne. 'No worse for it, I see!'

'Nor you,' said Master Villon, looking her over.

'Do you like my new suit?'

'Now that I notice it.'

She laughed. 'Wasn't that hangman a hasty devill! If we hadn't had a visitor I'd have been in paradise in no time.'

Master Villon studied her gravely. 'The visitor, as you say, was welcome.'

Her eyes lighted with the recollection of incidents she did not think it necessary to enlarge upon. 'He gave me the new costumes—for me and the boys.'

'Ah—he talked with you after I left?'

She arched her eyebrows. 'Did he talk with me! That man's unique!'

Master Villon returned her smile, but for him their meeting had come to an end. She stepped closer to him.

'You made me a promise, you know. Why not to-night?'

Her eyes had a cordial gleam in them, and for the second time he observed the merits of her person, but her proposal was an unpardonable offence. It seemed the most stupid of wrongs that he must listen to such words on that day of all days.

'I shan't be here to-night.'

She was neither offended nor, so far as he could judge, particularly disappointed, life being for her a series of chances, good and bad, no one of which she could count on.

'If you had stayed—there's a tavern here, not what you'd call an inn—but perhaps we'll meet again.'

She walked back to her companions, and Master Villon kicked the sides of his tired horse and started to retrace the path to Grigny. Had she not spoken to him, he would have travelled on towards Paris, but her discordant words had roused a surge of indignation, disgust with himself, an impulse to face again what, as he now felt, he had run away from. How could he remember Louise without humiliation unless he proved, even after she was gone, that her confidence in his courage was not displaced?

He retraced his path but without haste, stopping in this

village and that to rest himself and his mount. There would be no advantage in colliding again with that stream of visitors. It was the end of the afternoon when he came to the château gates, now closed as he had seen them first. He jangled the rusty bell. One of the outriders, an old friend of his, came to inquire who it was. Master Villon left him in no doubt.

'This morning the seigneur could not receive me. Ask him if he has changed his mind.'

The man did not need to be told the name. He shut the gate and left Master Villon waiting outside.

When he returned there was no welcome in his face. 'Monsieur, the seigneur begs to be excused.'

It was the message Master Villon had expected. 'Kindly tell the seigneur that he and I have no choice—we must talk to each other once more. I shall wait here and ring his bell till he invites me in.'

This time the delay was longer, but it gave Master Villon an opportunity to plan what he intended to say. The man brought back a surly look, but he unlocked the gate. 'The seigneur will see you this once, and never again.'

'A very short conversation,' said Master Villon, riding in, 'will satisfy me for ever.'

The man locked the gate and came running up. 'The seigneur has grown feeble, monsieur. We hope you will not irritate him.'

Master Villon made no comment, thinking that the exasperation would probably come from the other side. Now that he was to enter, the attendant treated him courteously enough, holding open the front-door and ushering him down that familiar hall to the little office where the seigneur had once opened a bottle of wine. There a bed had been set up. Master Villon guessed that the lame man wished to spend his days where he could keep an eye on the household.

There, propped on pillows, the seigneur was waiting for him, to all appearances not feeble at all, but in a great state of anger.

'Your impudence has no bounds!' he cried.

Master Villon laid his hat on a bench near the door and looked around for a more comfortable seat.

'I offer you no hospitality! I have not asked you to be seated!' The veins in the seigneur's temples were swelling to the bursting point. 'Say what you must and be gone!'

Master Villon faced him calmly. 'Your discourtesy, seigneur, does you no honour, but for her sake I overlook it.' He approached the foot of the bed.

The seigneur sounded a small bell on the table beside his pillow, and the outrider stuck his head in the room. He must have been listening at the door.

'This fellow,' said the seigneur, pointing a shaking finger at Master Villon, 'is a fugitive from justice, a thief! Bring in the guard and seize him!'

The man retired promptly, but Master Villon showed neither nervousness nor embarrassment. From the inside of his coat he took the safe-conduct which King Louis had provided.

'If you will do me the favour to read this . . .'

The seigneur's keen eye caught the signature, and he all but snatched the paper from Master Villon's hand. 'Ah!' he exclaimed triumphantly. 'It was for only a year, and the time has expired!'

Master Villon took back the document and tucked it safely away.

'The king is in Paris, seigneur, where I hope to meet him. His wish was that I should report when the year was ended. He will not be pleased if a subject of his, having seen what he wrote, delays me on my journey.'

The little guard of outriders, who once had ejected Master Villon from the house, came stamping into the room.

'You may wait outside,' said the seigneur. 'If I need you, I'll call.'

The men backed out.

'Shut the door after you!'

The door was closed.

'Now, François Villon, what is it? Be quick, and leave me in peace!'

Master Villon cleared his throat. 'In the first place, seigneur, I regret the accident which has caused you this long suffering.'

The seigneur glared at him. 'Go on—what else?'

'I need not tell you my sorrow . . .'

'Your sorrow? Did you come here to speak of Louise?'

'That was my purpose, seigneur.'

The old man controlled his wrath. 'Your sympathy is neither needed nor asked for. The grief you speak of, your personal sorrow, I should rather not connect with any of my family. You don't seem to realize that I dislike you.'

Master Villon all but smiled. 'Seigneur, I would not discuss with you or any man a subject so intimate, I may say so sacred, as my love for Louise. You perhaps know that we planned to marry. I shall remember her as my wife.'

The seigneur rose up so fiercely that he almost got out of bed. Then his strength failed, and he fell back panting. Master Villon allowed him a minute to catch his breath.

'My wish was to offer you, as I said, respectful sympathy, and to correct your impression that by allying herself with me your daughter did harm to the family name.'

The old man on the pillows turned his head from side to side and lifted a helpless hand. 'You are quite mad! Say anything you like! I shall keep my answer till the end.'

'My father,' said Master Villon, 'comes of blood quite as good as yours, though I regret to say he lacks your courage. Through him I have the privilege of knowing the best people in Paris.'

'If what you say were true,' interrupted the seigneur, 'I should be sorry for your father. He wouldn't deserve such a son. But as usual, no doubt you are lying.'

'My mother,' continued Master Villon, unperturbed, 'is by nature simple, as sometimes happens in the case of the very good. She is on the way to be a saint.'

'Whose mother did you say she was?' asked the seigneur, as though the story had become tangled.

'I was brought up to learning and to the other excellent things that earn men fame,' Master Villon went on, 'and

I don't need you, seigneur, to remind me that I have done much wrong. Too much!"

'Don't be hard on yourself,' protested the seigneur, with a mean smile. 'You robbed churches and committed murder and broke many a heart, the latest, I suppose, being my daughter's, but after all, these are trifles! I'd be sorry to think you had made any serious mistakes!'

'For Louise's sake...'

'If you insist on referring to her,' said the seigneur, 'kindly omit her name!'

Master Villon paused a second, then resumed his even tone. 'For her sake I wish you might believe that though I did evil, I was never happy in that conduct, and from the moment I met your daughter I forsook it. Seigneur, the difference between the good life and the bad is more often than not the result of inexplicable accidents. Had I never met her, I might have continued as I was.'

The face on the pillow suggested profound sleep. The eyes were closed, and the moustache was lifted on one side by a scornful smile.

'When I first wooed your daughter,' said Master Villon, 'we had a tryst one afternoon in a Paris cemetery.'

The seigneur opened his eyes wide, and the upturned moustache came down.

'There was no other convenient place to talk at ease. I remember the hour as peculiarly happy. I could have saddened it, however, by letting Louise know...'

'If you will be so kind...'

'By letting her know how many of my early friends were lying in the graves around us. Seigneur, we all began with what appeared an equal prospect of success, but some, for no reason that Heaven sees fit to disclose, died young. Of those that still live, a few are well endowed, like yourself, and many are poor, like me. Perhaps it would be a mistake on that account to say that you are the better man. The game is not yet played out, seigneur—neither of us has reached the end.'

'You think not, François Villon?'

Master Villon refused to notice the sneer. 'When I was

in Paris last,' he said, 'your friend Robert d'Estouteville was one of the great, provost of the city, a friend of the king. Now there's another king and another provost, Robert d'Estouteville is out of favour, and I, whom he tried to do away with, carry the king's safe-conduct. The wheel of fortune turns slowly, seigneur, but in the end, if we live long enough, we complete the circle—the poor become rich, the rich become poor, and back again to where they started.'

The seigneur lay still, with his eyes shut, the image of patience. 'This discourse goes deep, and so far as my humble philosophy permits an opinion, it is correct. Was there more you wished to expound?'

'One thing more,' said Master Villon, keeping his temper. 'The wheel of fortune supplies a test of our qualities but it doesn't say what our qualities are. Goodness and wickedness have little to do with the condition we find ourselves in at any one moment. You misjudged me, seigneur, because I had no money and was not liked by the police. When Job was on the low rim of the wheel, you would have called him a criminal.'

'You're a liar and a rascal,' commented the seigneur wearily, without bothering to open his eyes. 'You entered my daughter's room, where you had no right to be.'

'Seigneur!' cried Master Villon with a ring in his voice. 'Don't overtax my forbearance!'

Louise's father sat up straight. 'Am I losing my mind? Say that again!'

'You know what I said! I've said it before! Never was I so clearly in the path of virtue as when you found me in her room!'

They glared at each other.

'Is that all, Master Villon?'

'That is all, seigneur! I shall never again disturb you.'

He took up his hat and turned to the door.

'If you would find comfort—that is, if you wish to see her for the last time,' said the seigneur, in a tone that seemed almost kind, 'she lies upstairs, in that room of hers we have just referred to.'

Master Villon was too dazed to answer promptly, but as his mind began to work again he remembered his earlier visit to that room, the dishonest visit which the seigneur refused to know about, and which had better be forgotten.

'I shall remember her as she was.'

Nodding his head as though in approval of this choice, the seigneur reached over and rang the little bell. With the promptness which had impressed Master Villon a few moments before, the doorman stepped into the room, this time with a short rope coiled in his left hand. Behind him were the outriders with their swords.

'Take Master Villon just beyond the garden wall.' The seigneur's voice was courteous and restrained. 'He liked that old apple tree, which should have been cut down a year ago, if I hadn't looked forward to his visit. The upper boughs, I believe, are strong enough for your purpose.' The doorman stepped up to Master Villon and took him firmly by the elbow.

'Oh, tie his hands!' warned the seigneur. 'You can't trust him!'

The doorman showed embarrassment. 'Seigneur, it happens that this is the only rope in the house.'

'Cut a piece off it, then!'

'Seigneur, it is already short.'

'How long do you want it? It will go around his neck, won't it? There'll be enough left for a loop over the bough?'

The doorman held out the rope to one of the guards, who sliced off a piece, and knotted Master Villon's wrists behind his back.

'Seigneur, your men ought to know what you already are aware of, that I am travelling under a safe-conduct given by the king. Those who lay finger on me will pay for it.'

The outriders and the doorman looked up in consternation, but the seigneur was undaunted.

'Do your work, men! The safe-conduct is false.'

Master Villon argued with more energy. 'You think

yourself gentle-bred, seigneur, yet you intend to kill a man who knocked at your door for hospitality!'

'You did nothing of the kind! You threatened me! Either I could let you in, or you'd sit at the gate and ring the bell till the end of time. I opened my door that my neighbours might not suffer annoyance.'

'I think you have forgotten,' persisted Master Villon, 'that when you were plotting to murder me in the woods near Blois, an accident put you in my power, yet I spared your life.'

'I remembered it this morning,' said the seigneur cheerfully. 'Out of gratitude I merely told you to go away. That settled our account. Now that you have insisted, as it were, on breaking into my house a second time, I shall be thorough with you.'

Master Villon abandoned hope and turned towards the door, as though further protest would be vain.

'Let him enjoy the night air from the branch,' said the seigneur, 'but at sunrise, bury him. I expect early visitors.'

They marched Master Villon through the hall, down the front-steps, where the doorman found it necessary to light a lantern—through the gate, circling the wall on the outside till they came to the apple tree. The doorman remained watchfully beside him, holding up the lantern while the outriders tied a slip-knot in the rope and looked for a bough strong enough not to buckle when they hoisted up Master Villon.

If he stood thoughtful in the lantern-glare, it was not because he meditated any plan of escape. Since death seemed inevitable, he was ready—he even discerned a pattern of irony in the chances that brought him to die on that spot. Often had he been on the way to the gallows, and once he had mounted the ladder with the hemp around his throat. Now he would swing from the branch which had aided him to meet her! Since she was gone, he might as well go too.

One of the outriders appealed to the doorman. 'Can't you bring that light a little nearer?'

The doorman, the lantern and Master Villon moved up. 'You see, this bough,' continued the outrider, 'is the only one that will hold him. The larger branches lower down are either rotten or cracked. We ought to have something to stand him on—the rope doesn't reach.'

'If I may offer a suggestion,' said Master Villon, 'why don't you untie my hands, and splice on again what you cut off?'

By this friendly and reasonable idea, the outriders and the doorman were more than impressed. It touched their conscience, not to say their fear.

'Are you sure,' said the doorman, 'that the safe-conduct you spoke of is really false?'

'On the contrary,' said Master Villon, 'the king signed it in my presence.'

The outrider who had been trying the length of the rope took a step nearer the lantern. 'I don't know about this! The seigneur's a sick man. He may not be around when next the king comes by.'

'Do your duty,' said Master Villon. 'Put that rope together again.'

Because he used a tone of command, and because they had no further ideas of their own, they did as he said. With the piece put back, the rope was long enough.

'I'll climb up,' said the outrider, 'and tie a knot around the bough.'

'That's not the way at all,' said Master Villon. 'When you use a tree, you snap the rope over the branch—this way—you see?—it wraps itself tight. Now you can fasten it. Bring that lantern nearer.'

The doorman, with too many problems on his mind, held up the light at arm's length. He had put himself a yard or so in front of Master Villon.

After all, though a man is willing to die, he may on principle disapprove of suicide. Master Villon planted his foot firmly in the middle of the doorman's back, and pushed hard. The lantern went down with a crash.

In the darkness Master Villon observed that the skies were clearer in Saint-Maixent—spring in the north means

sudden clouds and unexpected showers. The evening had been bright, but now the stars and the moon were dimmed. As he picked his way down the road he hoped it would not rain before he found shelter. He hoped they would think of his horse before the storm broke, and not leave the beast out in the rain.

*Lady of Heaven, Queen of this mortal world,
Who even in hell art seated on Thy throne,
Accept a humble and a Christian heart
And number me at last among Thine own.
Weigh not my merits—they are none at all—
But cast into the balance, Queen Divine,
Infinite love, against those sins of mine!
Lacking Thine aid, no lost soul sorrowful
Could look for Heaven—none better knows than I.
In this faith let me live, and let me die.*

*Say to Thy blessed Son that I am Thine;
Of all my guilt may He remember naught,
As once Egyptian Mary He forgave
Or as for learned Theophilus He wrought,
Who by Thy intercession was set free,
Though Satan had the promise of his soul.
From sin like that, preserve and keep me whole,
Virgin Who stainless bore the sacrament,
Christ's body, at the altar lifted high!
In this faith let me live, and let me die.*

*I am a poor old woman, one who knows
Nothing at all; I cannot read or write.
At church, shining above me as I kneel,
Paradise full of harps is painted bright,
And hell beside it, where the wicked burn.
One frightens but the other cheers my heart.
Grant I may reach that joy, there where Thou art,
To whom the sinful in their need must turn,
Doubt and false show and indolence put by!
In this faith let me live, and let me die.*

*Princess and Virgin Mother, Thou hast borne
Jesus, Whose kingdom is Eternity.
He, the Omnipotent, put our frailty on,
Came down from Heaven our rescuer to be,
Offering His priceless youth upon the tree.
He is Our Lord; His worshipper am I.
In this faith let me live, and let me die.*

He Makes His Mother's Acquaintance

WHEN MASTER VILLON KNOCKED AT HIS MOTHER'S door, at the third hour after noon, he was in a bad humour, the personal resentment of a man who has trudged for days on muddy roads, in the rain. Now the sun was breaking through, but his clothes still clung to him like seaweed. At this hour his mother would perhaps have no fire lighted. As he knocked he wondered why he had come first to her, instead of stopping at the Pine Cone, where Robin Turgis and Margot, deficient in other virtues, kept a flame on the hearth, winter and summer.

He might have asked himself why he had come to Paris at all. With the safe-conduct of King Louis in his pocket he could indeed for the first time in many years walk safely through those beloved streets, but Montigny was gone, and Guy Tabarie, and he wouldn't care to meet Catherine nor his old enemy Peter Merchant nor the provost—only d'Estouteville was no longer provost—nor would it yield the slightest pleasure to meet again Ambroise, the provost's wife, who had charmed his youth, nor his godfather who really was his father, the chaplain of Saint Benoît.

What brought him home, though he did not stop to find the reason, was that churning up of the past which comes to the mind from the shock of loss or grief. If Louise had not died, Paris might have seen him no more. But bereavement folded him back on himself, in a wounded spasm of memory, and for the moment he was revisiting his early self, his student boyhood, when the heady flood of new experience invited to nothing worse than pranks, absolved in his mother's reprimand, which was a form of affection.

Now as he waited on her threshold he heard the pause at the tub—she would be drying her hands—then the quick step across the floor to let him in. She had not changed.

Not even in appearance, except that her face had a new zest which made her look younger.

'It's you! And soaked to the skin! You would choose a day like this!'

She had him in the room and the door shut and the coat off him. 'I'll fetch your jacket, the one you thought best not to wear, the day Montigny—and you never came back for it!'

Master Villon laid down his cap, ran his hand over the top of his bald head, surveyed the familiar laundry-tub, the pile of soiled clothes beside it, the rows of clean things, fresh-ironed, on the tables along the wall.

To his surprise the hearth-fire was burning, not a quick blaze to heat a cauldron of water, but a quiet well-nourished flame, as though his mother now imitated the great folk and warmed the dampness out of the house.

A basket lay at one side of the hearth, and in it a small child, an infant, less than a year old.

'Here!' said his mother, bringing the jacket. 'Put that on and I'll hang your fine coat over a chair. God grant you didn't steal it! Of course you wouldn't think to bring that shirt of your godfather's I lent you!'

Master Villon stretched his thin arms through the sleeves of his old garment, keeping his eyes on the child, who stared back at him.

'What is that?'

'Take a good look and see if you know!'

Crouching beside the basket he studied the infant at close range. Black eyes that seemed to miss nothing, a face at present rather chubby but promising length rather than breadth, a nose that even in this early stage was long and in time might be pointed. Master Villon was deeply moved. He did not turn again till he thought his cheeks had resumed their usual tint.

'Did Catherine ask you to take it?'

'I begged the child, as a favour.'

'That's where you did wrong,' said Master Villon, affecting callousness. 'It's nobody's affair but Catherine's.'

As he spoke he wheeled about for a good view of the infant. His mother joined him, with her hands on her hips.

'She asked aid of your godfather—he sent her to the nuns.' Master François turned to her quickly. 'What's his name?'

'His? Whose?'

'The child's.'

'Oh—it was Catherine, for its mother, but I've named it Joan.'

'A girl,' said Master Villon, in obvious disappointment.

'I couldn't see the makings of a nun,' said his mother, 'in any child of yours and Catherine's.'

The infant in the basket, fascinated by Master Villon's prolonged stare, broke into a happy smile. He turned away, embarrassed. 'You can't bring her up. You haven't the time.'

She looked at him, and he lowered his eyes, ashamed of what he had said.

'Will you bring her up yourself, François?'

'I'll have nothing to do with her! She'll be like Catherine, in spite of kindness.'

'I was afraid she might take after you,' said his mother, going back to her tub again. 'Will you sit down and talk while I finish my work?'

Master Villon helped himself to a stool, and for more effective thought rubbed the back of his head.

'I'm doing very well in Poitou,' he began, ill-at-ease. His mother bent over the scrubbing-board.

'For a year and more I've lived an honourable life in Saint-Maixent, at the apothecary's house.'

His mother stopped rubbing. 'God help the sick! You an apothecary!'

'I'm not—I live in the apothecary's house, and teach his son, and . . .'

His mother laughed. 'You teach his son, and I'll teach your daughter! No one told me that men are timid, vain, selfish and cowardly. I'll feed that information to her every day. The nuns would be less practical.'

His thoughts were confused, the embarrassment of seeing the child still bothered him, and his mother had him at a disadvantage. She knew it.

He fumbled in his pocket for his purse, now down to a few coins, one of which he laid on the nearest table, beside the fresh-laundered things.

'You can take it back,' said his mother sharply. 'You may have bills at the taverns and worse places; you've none here!'

'But if you keep the child . . .'

His mother walked to the table and swept the coin off. It fell to the floor, rolled in a circle, settled flat.

'When I'm not looking,' she said contemptuously, going back to the tub, 'swallow your pride and pick it up!'

Master Villon got to his feet and seized his hat. His mother seemed to dismiss him with her elbows, churning the suds up and down.

'I'll put on the coat I came in,' said he.

'It's there—it's still wet.'

'I don't mind.'

'Take your old jacket too.'

Master Villon was slow getting into his damp clothes. His mother kept to her work, knowing he had more to say and needed plenty of time. With his hat and coat on he turned again to the basket.

'I suppose you think I should look after it myself.'

'Me?' said his mother, rubbing harder. 'I have no thoughts.'

'If you give Catherine a foot she'll take a yard.'

'You know her best.'

There was another interval, while she wrung out the clothes.

'Where's that new love of yours—the girl that was to make a man of you?'

He breathed deep. 'I don't expect to see her again.'

At the change in his tone his mother looked up sharply, then went on with her wringing. A second later she stopped and dried her hands on her apron.

'Did she love you?'

'I think she did.'

'Well, time will cure her. She's better off as it is, unless God should make you over entirely. I wouldn't have a man

who left a child behind him, the way he would the peel of an apple!'

Master Villon turned on her savagely. 'That's what you've been trying to say to me since I came in! I didn't desert the child!'

'I'm not talking of the past,' said his mother. 'You didn't know about the child before this, did you? You couldn't desert it till you knew about it, could you?'

Master Villon softened his tone, but his manner still was positive enough. 'So you expect me to desert the child now!'

'She'll not be deserted,' said his mother. 'She has me.'

Master Villon took a look at them both, then went out the front-door.

He had not intended to leave so soon, but the conversation had stirred anger in him—not anger so much as resentment against his fate, against himself. No sooner was he on the street than he wished he had remained. He had things to say to his mother. He would gladly have taken the child in his arms. That's the way he had been all his life—too headlong. Well, he wouldn't go back. Not now, at any rate.

Since a bit of the afternoon remained, he walked briskly through the Célestin quarter to the river-bank, and across the bridge named after the Church of Our Lady, and so across the island where the church stands, and over another bridge to the beginning of Saint James Street. Almost within a stone's-throw lay the student world in which his youth had blossomed.

There were students now in the narrow thoroughfares, as many now as in his day, but they seemed to have committed themselves to scholarship at a ridiculously early age. When he and Montigny had listened to lectures in the cold wintry mornings, they were already mature. Perhaps his mother's memory would not confirm this opinion, but at least they were more mature than these noisy lads who derived, apparently, a purely animal satisfaction from the spring evening, the clean fragrance in the air, washed by the rain.

How often had he brought to this very scene the smart of his mother's rebuke! But there was a difference now, which accounted for some of his present uneasiness. If these future bachelors and doctors, laughing and calling in the street, awoke only discordant emotions, it might be because the fault his mother had scolded him for was more than usually grave. He had lived always in the moment, he had spent his most frantic efforts in escaping consequences, and once they were safely avoided, he had indulged the illusion that they didn't exist. Now it would be difficult to believe his small daughter Joan didn't exist! Perhaps the consequences of all his other raids upon life, though less tangible, were equally persistent.

How easy it would have been to take Louise, his bride, among those sharp-witted, sharp-tongued neighbours in Saint-Maixent! But to go back with an infant under his arm, an infant that looked like him—well, for the child's sake he'd have to spread the news that he was a widower, and the gossips wouldn't believe him, since he had lived at Saint-Maixent in notable cheerfulness for over a year, not a ripple on his face announcing the child's birth, not a shadow the wife's demise.

Well, whatever his decision would be, he didn't have to make it at once. He could enjoy the evening and his old haunts without fear of the provost. He moved on up Saint James Street, almost as far as the cloisters of Saint Benoît. To avoid a possible encounter with the chaplain, he turned to the right into Parchment Street.

The shops were unchanged, mere holes in the wall, most of them, where in his day he had bought precious paper—not nearly so much, it must be confessed, as a full schedule of study would have called for. There were purchasers now, dashing in and out of the narrow doors. Here and there the scriveners came from the shadowy cellars and stood on the cobblestones to admire the time of day.

Half-way down the short street the sign of the Chariot caught his eye. He noticed that the sign was fresh-painted in honour of the season. The artist had interpreted chariot as a royal coach, a lumbering affair that except for the

carvings on the outside might have been a haystack on wheels. Master Villon smiled at the familiar sight. To lodge at the Chariot had always been a scholarly ostentation. The rooms were reserved—or so the landlord liked to say—for the respectable and the learned. Some of Master Villon's friends had lived there. They must have got in by mistake.

As he was passing under the sign a voice hailed him from an upper window.

Craning his neck, he caught sight of a youthful and somewhat flushed face, leaning out.

'Come on up, Long Nose!'

Master Villon was about to proceed on his way when the voice hailed him again.

'I swore I'd invite the first who passed, and it's you, Heaven forgive me! Don't you want food?'

Master Villon in his time had seen many another supper-party gather with this informality. He paused. Now that he thought of it, he was hungry. He craned his neck again. Not one face but three leaned from the window, all, as he could easily recognize, in the middle stage of intoxication.

'You come up,' called his host, 'or we'll come down! If that isn't fair, what would you propose yourself?'

'Half-way,' protested one of the other red faces. 'We go down half-way, he comes up to meet us.'

'Very awkward,' called the third face. 'The stairway is narrow.'

His window-companions, finding great humour in this sally, were forced to withdraw themselves into the room to enjoy their loud laughter. Master Villon, well rid of them, walked on.

But before he turned the corner they were calling again, now from the street-pavement.

'Come here, Long Nose! Be civil!'

He turned and walked back, knowing that unless student character had changed, they would not let him escape unpursued. If the hue-and-cry were raised, the university would be at his heels.

'That's better, Long Nose,' said the one who had first called to him. 'You're from the country, aren't you?'

'From Poitou,' said Master Villon.

'That's on the edge of the earth!' explained the youth who had invited him half-way upstairs. 'It's a mercy you didn't fall off.'

'Manners, messieurs,' said the original proposer of the feast. 'It is the moment for introductions. I am Robin Dogis, at your service. My friend here'—he put his arm around the neck on the right—'is Hutin Moustier, who hesitated between the service of God and the service of the provost. Either he will be a theologian and get himself arrested by the sergeants of the Châtelet, or he will be a sergeant and arrest the theologians. My other friend'—he put his other arm around the neck on the left—'is Roger Pichart, who does not plan his future, but is temporarily engaged in the study of the civil law.'

Master Villon bowed as each name was disclosed.

'Roger Pichart,' continued Dogis, 'has an intelligent aunt. He would honour the old lady for her virtues, were they her only possession, but she also has the good taste to be wealthy. She understands that a student of the civil law must purchase a book or two, and these lawyers' manuscripts cost a man's ransom. She has sent Roger enough to pay for his summer's reading. We therefore invite you, as the guest whom God nominates, to join us at the best repast the Chariot can furnish.'

Master Villon smiled and bowed again.

'It isn't necessary,' Dogis went on, 'to know who you are, if you have a reason for hiding your name.'

'François des Loges,' said Master Villon, 'and I shan't forget the charm of your invitation, but if you'll permit me . . .'

Dogis took one of his arms, Pichart the other, and together they shoved him into the taproom of the Chariot. 'Wherever you thought you were going,' said Dogis, 'it must have been a worse place than this. Your thin face tells me you're not accustomed to food. Sit down, put something inside your skin.'

When they rose from the table, Master Villon, from old caution, had kept his head clear. The chatter of the three students had been on the whole not unpleasant, and the windfall from Pichart's aunt had inspired them to choose a meal which would have done credit to a connoisseur. They had no curiosity about him, he was glad to see—in fact, there were moments when he might have risen from the table and departed without being missed—those moments when their wine-soaked brains were on their own momentous problems, their love-affairs, the stinginess of their relatives, the iniquity of landlords, the heartlessness of the police. At other times they were aware of him, but only as you notice an accustomed relative whose plate and cup your hospitality keeps full.

The chance encounter with them, he told himself, served to reveal the measure of his growth. They were drunk, in the student tradition which he had once illuminated, and though hardly in command of their brains they behaved well, yet their carousing failed to amuse. They repeated his youth, but in another generation, and their pleasures struck him as absurdly juvenile. He had been consorting with children.

'Monsieur Dogis,' he said, 'you don't know what it means, this evening with you and your friends. I once studied at the university myself.'

Roger Pichart wrestled with the idea. 'He has studied in Paris—yet he looks like a countryman!'

'Our meeting will be perfect,' Master Villon went on, 'if I may be allowed to pay for the entertainment.'

Dogis turned dignified. 'Monsieur What's-Your-Name, you insult me! I invited you to dine!'

Pichart, who was about to count out his aunt's money, laid down his purse, in sudden indignation. 'You did! You invited him to eat at my expense! Generous of you! Why shouldn't he pay? Better still, why shouldn't you?'

Master Villon knew what would come next, and he didn't wish to be caught in a brawl. 'Monsieur Pichart, shall you and I share the bill? I'd count it an honour.'

Roger Pichart was sober enough to see that two dinners

cost less than three, the number he had originally thought to pay for. The threat of a quarrel evaporated instantly in a gush of fraternal affection.

'I'll take my leave,' said Master Villon, stepping across the threshold of the Chariot into the cool night. 'Heaven aid you on the road to learning!'

Robin Dogis, at the thought of parting, grew sentimental. 'We'll walk down Saint James Street with you.'

'Many thanks,' said Master Villon, hoping to be rid of them. 'But my way lies up the hill, and I wouldn't trouble you...'

'It's easier walking up than down,' said Dogis. 'The front of the foot has a hinge or spring, whereas the heel is as stiff as a post.'

Cheered by this reflection, they started to ascend the street which Master Villon knew best in the world, and in a moment they would be passing the church of Saint Benoît the Well-Turned, and the cloisters, and the chaplain might be abroad on some godly errand, and if he believed Master Villon was misleading the young...

'There's old Ferrebouc's,' said Pichart. 'Look at those slaves of his—how he keeps them sweating!'

They stopped to gaze through the windows at a writing-shop in a dingy cellar where Master Ferrebouc, official copyist for the Bishop of Paris, employed his apprentices at candle-lighted tables. The windows were open, and Pichart stuck his head in, to encourage the workers.

'Make the letters larger, and use more ink,' he admonished the scribe at the nearest table. 'The bishop is not so young as he was.'

All the toiling heads looked up. 'Go home and let your mother wash your face,' said he whose penmanship had been criticized.

Pichart interpreted this cordial advice as a personal challenge. 'You are wise never to wash yours,' he came back in a fine flash of wit. 'The dirt gives you character.'

And to point the observation he expectorated with range and accuracy right in the centre of the half-finished manuscript.

In no time at all the apprentices were in the street, and the noise of conflict brought students in force from all parts of the quarter, Master Ferrebouc himself coming hastily from the Mule next-door, where he had just sat down to a bowl of soup. Master Villon stayed long enough to see the old copyist take Robin Dogis by the collar and let him go again, Dogis having used his knife.

In front of Saint Benoît the Well-Turned the pavements were deserted. Master Villon sat on the kerb, removed his hat, wiped his brow, and listened to the riot. He could tell by the noise which side was in the lead. An abrupt collapse of the shouting, with a short pater of running feet, indicated to him the arrival of the provost's men.

On this very spot he had sat one evening years ago with Ysabel, the girl he had loved next after Ambroise, and Philippe Sermoise, his rival, had come at him with a knife. How the years slip away!

There was Sermoise now!

Not Sermoise, after all, but Roger Pichart, out of breath and still drunk. He joined Master Villon on the kerb and fanned himself with his hat.

'He should have used more ink! Wasn't I right? The bishop's sight is poor.'

Master Villon offered no opinion, and his reticence was as oil to the flame. Roger Pichart burst into a fresh quarrel.

'If he used ink enough, say so like a man! Say I was wrong, if you're not a coward! Say...'

Another figure emerged from the shadows, and Roger Pichart rose hastily, in case it should be the provost. Master Villon got up too. But it was Robin Dogis, now occupied with moral thoughts.

'You've done it this time, Pichart! Will you never behave with discretion, not even when we have a guest? Hutin has gone to the Châtelet.'

Pichart considered the news. 'What did he do?'

'You ruined the manuscript! Why will you give way to your impulses when we have a guest?'

Leaving the wine-soaked argument to end as it might, Master Villon stole away, from dark street to dark alley,

circling the regions where the police might still be watching. It was a full hour before he crossed the river and hurried through the Célestin quarter to his mother's door.

She was sitting by the embers of her fire, with a shawl about her shoulders. For reasons of her own she had left the door unlatched, and he came in without knocking.

'Have you had your supper?' said his mother, not looking around. Since the child was asleep, she spoke softly.

'I dined with some friends,' said he in a low tone.

'There was fighting among the students to-night.'

'I was there.'

Sharply she turned around with fear in her eyes. He drew a stool up to the fire between her and the infant's basket-cradle.

'I merely looked on,' he said. 'I saw it begin again. Montigny, Guy, myself—meaning no harm—on our way to the rope!'

His mother put her hand on his arm. 'Are they looking for you?'

'Not that I know.'

She sat still, gazing at the dying fire. He had his chin in his hands, looking towards the hearth but living the evening over, and other evenings before this.

'I'll carry my old jacket with me—it's not a bad coat.'

'You are leaving now?'

'At once.'

They were both silent again. He took from his purse one remaining gold coin. 'Put that,' he said, 'with what I gave you this afternoon, and spend it on the child. I'll send more.'

His mother forgot to speak softly. 'He thinks he is hiring a nurse! I must give him an account of the food she eats! He'll allow me so much for her clothes! It's a fine gentleman we are! God forgive you, François—He ought to, it's His fault for not making you a man!'

At the loud words the child stirred in the basket. Master Villon turned to the angry woman.

'I only wanted to help!'

'I'll bring her up by myself and in my own way!' cried

his mother. 'I'll teach her free what it cost me much to learn. She'll be on her guard against boys and men—not against love, there's no help for that—but against those that take their pleasure where they find it, without seeing it through to the end.'

'If you're telling me I ought to marry Catherine...' began Master Villon.

'Our Lady forgive me for the thought,' continued his mother, still more vigorously, 'but I fear the Commandments are incomplete! They say that children should honour their parents, which may prove a large handful of duty, but not a word do they add the other way around, how fathers and mothers should treat a child.'

'If I took her with me to Saint-Maixent,' broke in Master Villon, much troubled, 'wouldn't it be the end of the good name I've just built up? From the look of her they would know she is mine, and I told the whole town I am not married.'

His mother sat up straight with her knuckles on her knees and her elbows turned out. 'Thank God I'm a woman, the kind that can take in a child whenever I like, and my name none the worse for it! What a sensitive thing a man is! He can kill and rob, or leave a girl worse off than he found her, and his conscience is easy, but let him set his face towards virtue, and pity his flesh and blood if it gets in the way!'

The child began to cry, and Master Villon rose and paced the room. His mother paused in her scolding long enough to lift the infant with its blanket to her knee.

'I'll teach her to trust herself and hold her head up! When she gives away her heart, I'll tell her to look for nothing in return. She'll value her lover as I my racks to dry the laundry on, there when you need them and there when you don't, but nothing for a soul to live with intimately! I'll tell her to harbour no grudge, since God, in that puzzle which the priests call His wisdom, made them as they are.'

Master Villon put his hat firmly on his head, draped his old jacket over his arm, took from her the drowsy child. 'Has she no other warm things?' he asked.

His mother watched him bundle up the infant till only the tip of its nose showed beyond the wraps.

'You're not going to take her out into the night?'

If he had noticed his mother's eyes at that moment, there was a smile of triumph in them.

'You can't travel at this hour—the city gates are closed.'

'Give me back that gold piece,' said he. 'The gates can be opened.'

Without another word he strode from the house with his child in his arms, and his mother folded her toil-worn hands and let him go.

So fast he walked, he was far from her door when a voice hailed him. 'Not so much hurry, my fine fellow! What takes you abroad at this hour?'

He turned and faced two men, hiding in a corner shadow. When he stopped, they moved forward together. One was short. The other, bent in the shoulders, wore a fur-lined coat and a pointed hat pulled over his eyes. When they came closer he saw who it was.

'Sire, I have your safe-conduct. I am François Villon.'

The king laughed quietly and turned to his short companion. 'What did I tell you, Robert!'

Master Villon recognized the hangman of Orleans.

'Since the safe-conduct is out-of-date,' said the king, 'you went back to your old tricks. It is not so? Undo that bundle!'

They opened the blankets.

'Get a light for your lantern, Robert.'

The hangman struck his flint, and they examined the copy of himself that Master Villon was carrying.

'Mother of Heaven!' said the king. Very deliberately he helped wrap up the bundle again. 'Well, Robert, what about it?'

'Sire,' said the hangman, 'for this crime I don't know the punishment.'

The king laughed again. 'He carries it with him. François Villon, God has caught up with you.'

They sank back into the darkness, and Master Villon walked on, shifting his burden to the other arm.

POSTSCRIPT

'Here ends poor Villon's testament;

Himself draws to an end as well.

Come to the burying, good friends,

When you hear the tolling bell.

Wear your scarlet cloak to-day,

He was love's martyr, he is dead.'

Those were the parting words he said

When from this world he turned away.

He Brings Up a Child

WHENEVER MASTER VILLON FOUND IT NECESSARY TO reprove his daughter for some almost innocent fault, proper to her extreme youth, he braced himself for such an encounter as had occurred in his boyhood, when his god-father did the scolding. But his daughter considered every point he made, and after reflection agreed with him, so there was no cause for argument between them, only he wondered at times whether she was indeed his child. This question sent his thoughts astray from the immediate task of mental or moral training back to days and nights long ago, when he wasn't what he had since become.

The name his mother had given the child, he kept. To her playmates in Saint-Maixent she was Joan—Joan Montcorbier. When he reappeared after that awkward journey from Paris, bringing the infant with him, the gossips, as he had expected, sharpened their tongues for a choice morsel, but in his forehanded way he threw them a bone flavoured with romance rather than scandal. He let them believe his marriage had been a secret only because his parents, of an old house, would never countenance his alliance with a poor girl, and he had come to set up a home in the south, where none would recognize him, and where wife and hoped-for offspring could be safe in obscurity, which everyone knows is the condition of happiness for true lovers. But in his absence his bride had pined away, lasting just long enough to produce Joan and furnish the infant's initial nourishment. Now Joan was all he had left, but he had resolved to keep cheerful, for the child's sake and as her mother would have wished. He begged his friends to respect his grief and never again mention his loss. They didn't—that is, not in his presence.

In several respects the story was weak, but as material to whisper about, and amend, and enlarge on, it was perfect.

To Henri Dubois, the apothecary, and Héloïse his wife, Master Villon told the truth. They were the only residents

of Saint-Maixent, he said, enjoying that kind of intelligence which pierces to the essentials, and besides, he owed them frankness since for a while longer he wished to occupy their spare-room. He was not married; he had fallen into one of those errors which it is best to let God handle, especially when He chooses to equip it with an outward and visible sign; anyway, it wasn't Joan's fault, and here she was.

There is nothing so disarming as a confession made in strict confidence, when the confidence is exclusive. Héloïse Dubois shook her head, to show that she had standards, but from that moment she was leagued with her husband and Master Villon to protect Joan against a carping world.

Gerard Dubois, the household prodigy, once more plodding under Master Villon's guidance towards the arts of reading and writing, looked upon Joan as an undeserved affliction, too young now for companionship, likely at no age to be of use to the world. No girl could be useful. His father bade him treat her as if she were his sister, but he knew she was not. She was an intruder, who claimed far too much of his mother's care.

But his hostility lessened as she grew and bloomed and charmed even him. At first he tried to ignore her; then with her first steps, holding on to chairs, he tried to avoid her, but one day she caught at his hand, and he felt the clutch of small fingers; then, when it was time for such adventures, Master Villon showed her how to form her letters and what names to call them, and with the judgement of his seven years Gerard saw that though a girl she was clever. For her those tasks were easy which he had found hard.

It was impossible to snub or tease her. He tried, with the crude instinct of the male, but she disarmed rudeness as she drew the sting from her father's reproofs, by her surprising sympathy with his point of view. When she was playing on the floor with some blocks of wood, Gerard asked contemptuously what she was building.

'House.'

'Call that a house?' said he, kicking the top of it off.

Promptly she knocked down the rest, laughing as though he had invented a new game. A man can do nothing with a girl like that. Gerard gave up.

Shortly after she began to acquire the alphabet, the boy discovered that she had a place in his life. He was lonely without her when her father took her away. Master Villon had prospered as notary and scribe, and the romantic mystery which hung over him and the child was far from a disadvantage. Many a curious citizen commanded his services in the hope of picking up some information. Having at last a thrifty handful of gold, he bought a cottage near the forest on the edge of the town, set in a small garden with fruit-branches and vines against the wall, and a shade tree that one could enjoy of an afternoon.

Here Gerard came regularly for a stubborn tussle with Latin, and Joan would read aloud to her father, and the boy, apparently engrossed in the classics, would marvel that she had acquired good-looks, now that she no longer shared the same house with him.

Master Villon in a deep, quiet way was happy. There were moments when his thought went back to the Paris streets and the wild doings that had disturbed those thoroughfares, and of course Joan called to mind Catherine. Joan resembled her mother, to his regret. She had gradually lost that striking suggestion of himself. Her eyes were large, her dark hair was thick and wavy, and her nose though long was not sharp-pointed. When his mood was depressed he asked whose child had he accepted as his own. When he felt more cheerful, he saw that she had his smile, and in her talk he recognized tricks of his own spirit.

All the while he thought of Louise. Never once, as he grew older, did that vital loveliness fail to go with him, a ghost by his side. There were moments when he caught himself wishing that Joan were Louise's child, but in justice to Joan he put away the thought. She had no choice of parents. She might not have chosen him.

Even with his memories and his doubts he knew he had more happiness than those who are hungry for life may

count on. The ecstasy was gone, but he had found a sort of keen peace, a rarer form of joy. He would sit under the shade tree, when a Sunday or a holiday brought free hours, distilling from all that he could not forget those poems of his which Joan begged to read, but he said she wasn't old enough.

'How old must I be, father?'

'As old as Methuselah.'

'Father,' she asked after a pause, 'how old is Methuselah?'

Master Villon laughed. 'Child, he died a thousand years ago, just before I began to write poems. He was my age, but I look younger.'

Sometimes in his garden he sat motionless, seeing a river-bank and a girl coming towards him, a tall girl in a linen gown, swinging her sun-hat by the ribbon. Those days he wrote nothing.

When Joan was fourteen he happened to mention his boyhood pleasure at a Paris fair. She wished to know about Paris, and he described it in such bright terms that she asked why he had come away. He saw his error in time and changed the subject. From that moment, he was glad to believe, no thought of hers rested on the lovable but dangerous city. Never again did he mention Paris. She never mentioned it to him.

One delight Saint-Maixent gave him which was all the fresher because he had grown up among those noisy streets and dreamy churches and forbidding towers by the Seine. Here on the edge of the southern town his eyes and ears opened to the quite other enchantment of the countryside. He had not known—what poet of the pavements would know?—how many flowers there are besides the lily and the rose. He had thought of the seasons as an alternation of winter and misery with summer and sun, but on the fields around Saint-Maixent there came fresh colours and patterns with every month. Even after the harvest there was a tapestry of stubble and autumn-ploughed earth.

And the innumerable birds, of every kind and size, moving north or south before the weather changed, as though

they were in nature's secret! He would listen to their songs or their calls or their cries, endlessly fascinated.

Joan agreed that the call of a bird was a lovely thing, but he could see that being accustomed to birds she took them for granted unless he wished her to listen. She preferred people.

He had always thought that time in the country would be sluggish if it moved at all, but at Saint-Maixent the years slipped by too fast. He knew he ought to do more for Joan than teach her to read and keep her ignorant of Paris. At the right moment it would be his duty to tell her some of the things, about herself and other human beings, which she would have known had she been left to his mother's bringing-up. A difficult kind of education, though plain speech was one of his gifts. Whenever he prepared to attack the problem he realized that she was much too young. Then suddenly she was a woman, in sight of her eighteenth birthday.

Even then he might not have spoken had not another responsibility, too long ignored, spurred his conscience forward. Recently—for three years or more, when he measured his procrastination with an honest eye—Gerard had made himself as much a part of the house as the chairs they sat in. Unless wise care were taken, Joan might fall in love with Gerard. She had too much sense, of course, but nature was nature, and everywhere dangerous. Yet to point out that Gerard was an undesirable possibility might call attention to him as a possibility.

Why worry about the girl, after all? She was what a daughter should be, quiet and cheerful, skilful about the house, ready to cook a meal or mend torn clothes or wash the linen. Any parent in Saint-Maixent would have been proud of her. Furthermore, she was of a striking appearance; sedate yet with a zest for whatever business was in hand, modest yet with a promise in her glance.

It was that look of hers, one afternoon when Master Villon found her at the cottage door, that warned him the time had come. She seemed to be deriving unusual pleasure from her thoughts.

'Ah,' said he, 'to come home and find you waiting! I shall always expect that greeting, Joan. You spoil me.'

She gave him a kiss, and told him he was late, which he wasn't, and she would have supper ready in half a minute.

Over the bread and soup she was affectionate and gay, spreading her gossip with witty comment. He felt churlish to interrupt with what had to be asked.

'Was Gerard here this afternoon?'

'He stopped in, for just a moment. Did you know his father had taken his rheumatism to bed? Gerard says it happens every spring, when his mother wants to go shopping in Niort. Oh, I forgot to tell you—have you heard what the butcher did to that son-in-law of his? He...'

Master Villon let her talk on, to put a space between his questions.

'What time was Gerard here?'

'Gerard? Oh, late—just before you came home. Why, father?'

'Now that he's grown up, he talks more to you than to me,' said Master Villon, smiling to show that was all he meant. 'I miss my pupil.'

She had gone to the door, not to look for his home-coming, but to bid Gerard good-bye. Perhaps to give him a parting kiss, a green-love kiss, awkward but at that stage more than satisfactory. After the boy had gone she had stood there dreaming, with that perilous light in her eyes!

Master Villon decided that Joan must be instructed at once in what was good for her. Not while they were at the supper-table, but in the garden afterwards, when they could confide their secret thoughts to each other fully, without haste, until the hour when she retired to her upper room, to repose till the house-work called her again at dawn.

She must have felt a tension in the air. When he was in place beneath his favourite tree and she on a bench beside him, he noticed that her lively talk had come to an end. Perhaps she was listening to the night-sounds from tree and field.

'There's our friend, the owl.'

She glanced at him quickly. 'What did you say, father?'

'The old owl, my dear. His first hoot this evening.'

Master Villon drew a long breath.

'It's an exceptionally fine evening, Joan.'

'It is, father.'

'The weather in this part of France,' he continued, manoeuvring for position, 'is at all seasons gracious, but where I used to live, in the north, we had fogs and sharp changes—cold one day, hot the next.'

'How very unpleasant, father!'

He tried again. 'Weather affects the character of us all, I think. The seasons too. People who in winter are notably reliable, often become nervous in the spring.'

'Do they? How odd!'

'Well, don't you?'

'Never, father! I'm the same all the time.'

'In my youth,' said Master Villon, rather weakly, 'I was aware of the spring.'

For a moment neither spoke, then Joan looked at him. He noticed how solicitous she was, how womanly, almost motherly.

'Father—are you troubled about something? Is there anything you wish to tell me?'

He cleared his throat. 'I might have done more for you.'

'You've always been kind.'

'Where I used to live,' said he, 'there were many unfortunate girls who hadn't been well brought up. It was the fault of their parents.'

She laughed. 'Am I like them? I'd never call myself unfortunate!'

'Their habits are vicious,' said he, 'yet often they are attractive to look at, and for a while they think themselves happy. They learn the truth in their later years, after thirty or so.'

He paused so long, thinking of Ysabel and Catherine and one or two others, that Joan asked for a more detailed account of what unfortunate girls learn at thirty, on the edge of old age.

'They find out what men think of them.'

'Father, didn't they know that all along?'

'My child, it's easy to trust men while you're young. Their promises ring true, particularly in the spring. These unlucky girls begin with the only man in the world, and after he has left them they find another only man, and then another. At the end they find nothing but old age.'

'Father, why do you tell me this?'

Not being clear in his motives, he couldn't say. He merely filled in the sketch of misfortune. 'Sometimes they have a child, though they are not married.'

He was surprised, even shocked, that his sentiments were in close accord with the lectures of his own father, the chaplain of Saint Benoît. Was he too growing timid, or had he misjudged the chaplain? Could you live courageously for yourself, yet through affection tell your child to be cautious?

'Father, you seem unjust to the men. Perhaps when they promise they intend to be faithful, but they change, or the girl does. They're not to blame for that, are they? I think they do wisely to take their one happy moment—before they change. Of course you shouldn't trust a man. No girl really does. But you can love, and trust yourself.'

At this ripe sense, so nearly in his own vein, Master Villon fell speechless. Evidently Joan was as yet heart-free, and for that he was thankful, but where had she gathered her wisdom? Had it come from nature, as a gift, or had she paid for it? He remembered his own heartaches and was sorry for her. But it couldn't be. Every hour of her life, since she left her basket-cradle, had been guarded by his vigilance.

'Few women, or men either,' he went on more firmly, 'know the peculiar nature of love. What you say, daughter, is nearer the truth than you think, but you don't say all. Love is a god, as I used to read when I was at the university, a being some of us are born to worship. But the lover is no god, though he will seem so. For that reason those who persist in the worship of love are sure to be martyrs.'

'Father, how ridiculous! Suppose they both loved—really did?'

He shook his head. 'It would be too beautiful for this world. One of them would die.'

So dark an estimate of her future could not convince Joan, but she held her tongue, with the tolerance of the healthy for the sick.

'There's another side of it, daughter. Too many young men, like the boys you know in Saint-Maixent, are not lovers at all but woman-hunters, looking always for a new victim. Among themselves they talk over the chase afterwards comparing the ease with which this girl and that fell prey to their skill. I wouldn't speak of such matters, but you probably haven't had occasion to know this danger...'

'Why, father, you weren't listening when I told you about the butcher's son-in-law! The butcher found him in the lane with that girl who keeps house for the carpenter!'

Master Villon was, to his annoyance, thrown off balance by the illustration, particularly since she told it with a laugh in her voice. He wished he could be sure the merry tone sprang from extreme innocence. He had done his best to say that as a woman she might act one part or the other, the butcher's daughter or the carpenter's housekeeper. If the plight of either furnished her with amusement, she must be even now too young for the truth he was spreading before her. Or was he too late? Had her mind grown old before experience touched her? Had she learned to shield herself with a smile against the misfortunes of others, or her own?

The feelings that stirred him just then were rebellious, like the emotions of his youth when he had listened against his will to good advice. The peace which he had enjoyed at Saint-Maixent developed for that one moment a serious flaw. The philosophy which he had been expounding was solidly built on the rocks of his own experience, but he was a poet, not a philosopher, least of all a preacher, and even as he talked sense his heart preferred the unreckoning have-at-you of adventure. He was advising Joan against himself.

If he hadn't felt the duty to counsel her, his true condi-

tion would never have stepped into the light to embarrass him, and he might have lived on believing that what he sought was the serenity of age.

Now he saw that he wanted nothing of the kind. He had been quiet only because he could not be otherwise. The spark had been hidden but it had not died. Let a door still swing wide, even so late, and he would go exploring.

He tried to order his thoughts and make one more attempt with Joan, honestly admitting that his impulse to warn her started perhaps from jealousy of youth. In the silence he heard the owl from the near-by wood sounding his ghostly call. The hens on their roost set up an animated clucking, as if a fox were near. He looked around to be sure the chicken-house was securely barred. The evening calm settled again.

'Are you in love with Gerard?'

'Father! How absurd! Is that what you have been talking about?'

'It probably is, Joan. I was thinking—I've been troubled by the idea more than once—he might whistle for you some day, and you might lose your wits and believe it was the divine signal and run to him.'

Joan did not laugh but she seemed amused. 'He's a nice boy—but a boy.'

'Surely a boy,' said Master Villon, 'but how nice is another matter. If you answered his whistle you would find out. I like him, but for years I was his teacher. I mean, he came to me for his lessons. Has he decided what he will work at?'

'His father still advises the law, but Gerard thinks it doesn't harmonize with his temperament.' She smiled frankly. 'He won't choose any work if he can help it. His father, he says, has done enough work for two.'

'When he says that, what do you answer?'

'I tell him he's lazy. He is.'

Master Villon picked his ground carefully. 'A boy shouldn't be judged entirely by his behaviour in school, and Heaven knows I was a queer schoolmaster, but he seemed to me unreliable.'

Joan nodded her agreement. 'I never count on him. I know he'll keep his word if he can.'

'If he finds it convenient,' said Master Villon.

Joan accepted the correction. 'He does lean to whatever's comfortable.'

'Then let me ask why you consider him a nice boy.'

Joan brushed her hair off her forehead and sat up straight on the bench. 'He has done nothing important and perhaps he never will. I suppose he worries his mother and disappoints his father.'

Master Villon was on the verge of remarking that Gerard lived on the savings of his industrious parents, but he checked himself in time, remembering the money-bags of the chaplain of Saint Benoît and his own late start at earning a livelihood.

'But what I like about Gerard,' said the girl, 'is his daring, his enjoyment of every moment, his gay spirits.'

Master Villon had his voice under control. 'So that's what you like in him! I suppose you never saw it in anyone else.'

'Only in him,' said she. 'The other boys are as timid as old men.'

She must have heard his gasp of astonishment.

'Timid is the wrong word, father, and I didn't mean to criticize you. You're not really old. But don't you think a young man is better off if he isn't so anxious never to make a mistake? You can't be very attractive, can you, if you always count the cost, always draw back from a risk, always protect your skin?'

'Your portrait of Gerard,' said Master Villon, 'is favourable, yet I recognize it. You probably can draw a more accurate picture of him than of a tottering dotard like me.'

'Oh, father!' protested Joan.

'But after that inventory of his charm, would you say he'd make a safe husband?'

She shook her head. 'He's the last thing I'd call safe! Exciting—but never safe.'

'And you want excitement?'

'Father, you keep asking about my wants—who told you

I was discontented? When the right moment comes I'll fall in love, I suppose, but haven't I seemed happy, here with you?'

He had to admit that her affection for him had been even and constant. These questions with which he was plying her were the invention of his fears.

'We shall always be happy,' he said. 'I've talked too much. You'll understand I merely wish to be helpful, so far as an old man can be.'

'I *didn't* call you old! You twist my words!'

He laughed, and said no more. But Joan, feeling probably that the laurels of the argument were hers, went on to elaborate her point of view.

'You know as well as I that people can't feel about life as their children do. It's always a different life. Gerard put that very well the other day. His parents planned a home in some town that needed an apothecary, so they came here. If Gerard wanted to be an apothecary...'

'Does he?'

'I said *if*, father. In that case he'd have to go to another place, where an apothecary was needed. That's supposing he wanted to imitate his elders.'

'Why couldn't he stay here, daughter, and carry on the shop?'

'Gerard spoke of that. He said there was no satisfaction in a business you inherit. You should build for yourself.'

'Well,' said Master Villon, 'I'm not urging him to be an apothecary. Enough people die as it is. He should have studied law as his parents wished.'

Joan diverted his attention from Gerard. 'What would you urge me to do?'

'Stay as you are, my dear.'

'And which one of the boys in this town should I marry?'

He couldn't pick out a notable candidate. 'The right man will come along—be patient.'

'You came along, how many years ago? No one has settled in Saint-Maixent since that day. And you were already married.'

He had no answer. She sat on the bench, straight and alert, as though eager not to miss one of his syllables. He stretched his arms above his head.

'Isn't it your bedtime, daughter?'

'So early, father? This beautiful evening!'

She was thoughtful a moment, then she turned to him.

'Gerard was saying you spent your boyhood in wonderful times, when a man could be anything he chose, and you had for your companions, to give an example every day, the boldest folk who ever walked the earth.'

'What's this?' said Master Villon, disconcerted at the possibilities of Gerard's information. 'With whom did I rub elbows?'

'He mentioned Joan of Arc, since I was named after her.'

'There you are! I wish that boy had studied harder, or kept his ears open. The good Maid and I hardly met. She died the year I was born.'

'Well, Gerard just mentioned her as typical. I don't believe you realize how fortunate you were, compared with us in these days, when nothing happens.'

What was there for him to say? She rose to kiss him good night.

'Rest well, daughter!'

She delayed a moment. 'Is there such a thing, father, as forgetting what love is like? If people are married they must have been in love, but some of them stare at you when they hear the word, and some speak only of danger and shame.'

'I, for instance?'

'I wondered why you were so bitter. Weren't you and mother happy? You never speak of her.'

His emotions were too strong for him, and he left his favourite place under the tree to stride up and down the stretch of green. Was he happy with Catherine! His buried wrath came to life.

'You ask to know about your mother?'

'Tell me!'

He couldn't. The earnest young face looking up at him,

with all laughter gone, revealed dreams that he had implanted. He couldn't kill them now.

'It's hard to speak of her, child. But if you imagine her as beautiful and good and—and—what your mother should be, you can't go wrong.'

She kissed him, more affectionately than before.

'About love I said nothing bitter,' he went on, 'though I have reason to distrust the accidents and pitfalls of youth. But love—I could praise it in terms you would think insane. When I was young I was poor. Without love I should have had nothing but hunger, the mud of the streets, a cold wind on my body. In a sharp winter the wolves came up to the doorsteps of the rich, and if you were abroad that night the wolves would detain you. But even a beggar, if the spell of love is on him, lives in a golden world, and he will sing for gratitude.'

'Enchantment,' said Joan.

'Enchantment,' echoed her father.

'And you think it is nothing but that? Did you wake up and see the mud and feel the cold?'

Master Villon smiled. 'Who's bitter about love now? I'm trying to show that I haven't forgotten. I did wake up, but that was my error, and I always was honest enough to confess my weakness, and fall in love again. No mortal can come nearer to the perfect life.'

'Are you in love now?'

He sat down under the tree and when he answered he was smiling.

'In spite of my years I am in love now—with you.'

As she opened her lips, to ask another question, the old owl sounded once more, with surprising insistence. She bethought her of the hour.

'I'll get no sleep at all! How pleasant it was! Good night, father!'

He waved his hand after her, as she hurried into the house. The talk had been smoother than he had hoped, and now that it had ended so well, he could pause for a moment and enjoy her shrewd insights and her difficult questions. She would be, some day, a remarkable woman,

the match of any man for wits, himself over again for zest in experience—or she might have that trait from his mother. His mother, with no chance at all, kept alive the strongest taste for the daily struggle. A brave spirit, to her dying day! The thought made him sad, now that it was too late.

He must take Joan to Paris! Why hadn't he realized it sooner! You couldn't keep anything from that girl—if Paris was there, better show it to her yourself. He would go on a leisurely journey, and perhaps on the way they would meet the boy she was dreaming of. Then he would let them live where they preferred. Why not in Paris itself? For him Saint-Maixent was a haven, but Joan was right, nothing happened there. She would walk along Saint James Street, past the cloisters, never guessing what had happened behind that window in the attic. She would cross the bridges and see the Pine Cone. Margot might still be there, and Robin Turgis. Old people now. Catherine herself might be there! Well, he and Joan wouldn't go in—they would just pass and notice the tavern-sign swinging in the wind.

Again the owl's hoot pierced the night. In another moment he would heed nature's timepiece and go to bed, but it was a temptation to linger in this calm, in the midst of this blessed security, with the kind darkness dropping down, and the voices of birds, such as one never hears in Paris . . .

His mind, for some reason, was not satisfied with the owl. Its call now was what even a city ear would expect, but that sharp noise that had sent Joan to her room—out of what kind of throat had it come? For a minute he sat still, not willing to admit he was frightened, then he walked quickly to the house-door.

'Joan!' he called. 'Joan!'

She did not answer. He ran upstairs to her room.

There was no sign that she had been there that evening. She was gone.

Master Villon stood under the low roof, drowned in three successive waves of feeling. At first his impulse was

to curse Gerard and upbraid his daughter for her treacherous flight.

Then, as though the blade of truth had cut to the heart, he knew beyond doubt that she was his child.

And at last his resentment died, and the smile returned to his wrinkled cheek as he felt a glow of pride that she had courage, and would endure no fetters, not even of affection. He imagined that Louise stood near him with her hand on his arm and laughter in her eyes, reminding him how they too had dared, and for an hour had reached the happiness that endures.

END

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 — 10 11 12

1938.

8722

Titel: *The Brief Hours of Francis Villon.* Band:

Verfasser: *Erskine, John.*

Verlag: *Albatros.*

Ort:
Leipzig.

Bemerkungen:

Gruppe:

11

Einband:

Papier.

Eingereicht

26. 8. 38

Verk. • Einkpr.

2.-

1,45

Leihpreis:

0.40

1832

10. 1. 38 832

18.8.30 323

22. 2. 364222

15.11.40 4325

47.47.832

17.1.50	6327
---------	------